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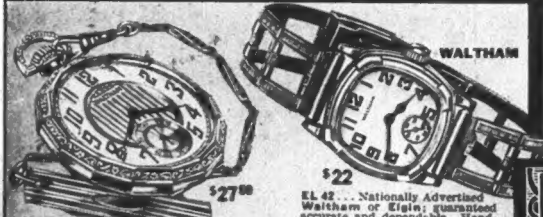

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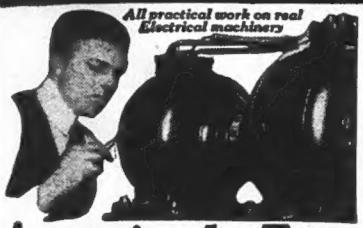

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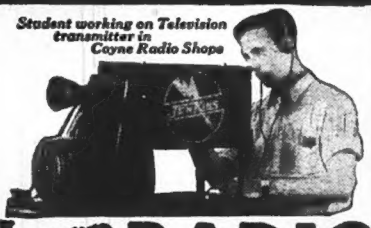

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A-8

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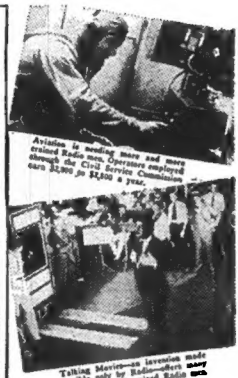

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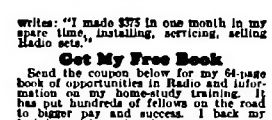

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"Hay crosses the gulf, taking with him the cord which controls the electro-magnet."

Werewolves of War

By D. W. Hall

PART I

TRAPPED again!

But this time, Lance swore, they'd not get away without paying dearly for it!

Under the mesh of his gas-mask the lean lines of his jaw went taut. Tense, steely fingers flipped to the knobbed control instruments; the gleaming single-seater scout plane catapulted in a screaming somersault. Lance's ever-wary sixth sense told him the tongues of disintegrating flame had licked the plane's protected belly, and for the fact that it was protected he thanked again his stupen-

The story of the "Torpedo Plan" and of Capt. Lance's heroic part in America's last mighty battle with the United Slavs.

dous luck. He pulled savagely at the squat control stick; the four Rahl-Diesels unleashed a torrent of power; and the slim scout rose like a comet, and hurtled, the altitude dial's nervous finger proclaimed, to ten thousand feet. Lance eased off the power, relaxed slightly, and glanced below.

They'd started off a squadron of fifteen planes. Thirteen had crumpled beneath that treacherous, stabbing curtain of disintegrating flame. Only two of them were left—he and Praed.

Praed, of course!

The fellow's plane was pirouetting nearby. Lance was the squadron leader. He jammed his thin-lipped mouth close to the "mike" and rasped:

"They trapped us again! There's some damn spy at our base. Stand by, Praed! They'll send up a few men to wipe us out, too . . and we're goin' to square the account!"

He listened for Praed's answer. Presently it came.

"I can't! They got two of my motors. I'm limping badly. We'd better beat it while we can."

Lance's mouth curled. He roared:

"Go on, then, beat it! But I'm goin' to take a couple of 'em, anyway." Disgusted, filled with red anger, he flung the phones from his head, watched Praed's plane whirl its stubby nose for home, settled himself alertly in the low, padded seat and concentrated his attention on the ground below.

He'd been right. Tiny, gray-clad figures were pouring from their barracks, rushing madly towards the dozen or so planes neatly drawn up on the field. Lance's mouth twitched. They probably wondered, down there, why the devil he didn't beat it—like Praed! He stroked the lever which controlled his five gas bombs, centered his battery of incendiary-bullet machine-guns and ruthlessly shoved the control stick full over.

THE Rahl-Diesels pumped at full power; his plane plummetted downwards with the speed of light, a hurtling shell of steel. His unexpected move took the men below by surprise. Lance knew they needed at least ten minutes to prepare another salvo of disintegrating flame; he had about four minutes left.

There was a restless, thudding chatter, and his bullets began to mow them down.

Lance could see the horrified expressions of the men beneath, and chuckled grimly as they sought to escape the wrath of his hot guns. He flung bursts of spouting, acid-filled lead at the defenseless planes, and saw two of them collapse in shrouds of acrid white smoke. And still he dove.

At a bare one hundred feet he tugged the control stick back, and the tiny scout groaned under the pull of her motors. Then her snout jolted upwards. Lance pounded the gas bomb lever, and smiled a tight smile as he sensed the five pills sloping down from their compartment in the scout's belly.

A second later came a rolling, ear-numbing crash. Lance, safe at a perch of a few thousand feet, grinned as his narrowed eyes beheld the sticky curtain of death-crammed gas hug over the enemy base.

"That'll quiet 'em for a few minutes!" he muttered savagely.

A few minutes—but not more. And he had no more bombs; his ammunition belts were nearly depleted. "I guess," he murmured, "I'd better follow that quitter, Praed. I've paid 'em for the boys they got, anyway!"

He levelled the plane out, threw a last glance at the carpet of gas he had laid, and spurred the purring Rahl-Diesels to their limit. His speed dial flashed round to five hundred, five-fifty—seventy—and finally rested, quivering, at the scout's full six hundred miles per hour.

Under the streamlined plane's speeding body the gnarled, bomb-torn terrain of Nevada hurtled by. A rather sad frown creased Lance's prematurely old brow as he glimpsed it. Thousands of lives had been thrown into that

ground; the hot, tumbled waste was doused with freely-sacrificed blood, the blood of whole regiments of America's heroic First Home Army. Martyred men! Lance couldn't help swearing to himself at the bitter thought of that terrible reckoning day. It was the price his country had paid for her continued ignoring of the festering peril overseas. Slaughtered like sheep, those glorious regiments had been! Helpless, almost, before the ultra-modern war weapons of the United Slav hordes, they'd stopped the numbingly quick advance merely by the weight of their bodies. Like little Belgium, in 1914. They'd held the Slavs to California, ravished, war-desolated California.

THE thin front-line trenches far behind, Lance began a slanting dive that raised his speed well over six hundred. Through the front magnifying mirror he spied the squat khaki buildings of his base. Werewolves of War, the batch of planes he belonged to had been christened, and it was a richly deserved title. In front of the front they fought, detailed to desperate, harrying missions, losing an average of ten men a day. The ordeal of gas and fire and acid bullets added five years to a man's brow overnight—if he served with the Werewolves of War.

Lance was only twenty-four, but his hair was splotched with dead gray strands; his eyes were hard and weary; his face lined with new wrinkles. Ah, well, it was war—and a losing war, he had to admit, that they fought. If a miracle didn't come, America would crumble even as old Europe had, before the overwhelming Slavish troops.

Even now, as Lance knew through various rumors, the Slavs were massed for a grand attack. And with what could America hold them back?

His helicopter props spun, and the scout nestled down lightly on the tarmac. Lance switched off the faithful Rahl-Diesels, swung open the tiny door and leaped from the enclosed cockpit.

"Sir," he rapped to thin, stern-browed Colonel Douglas, "there's no longer any doubt in my mind. This is the fifth time we've been anticipated—trapped! The enemy is informed directly of the attacking plans of our scout details. There's a spy at this base!" He lowered his eyes for a second and said in a queer tone of voice: "Thirteen of 'em went down to-day."

Colonel Douglas' tired face showed the never-ceasing strain he was under. He clasped hands behind his back, took a few nervous turns up and down the small office and finally, with a somewhat hopeless sigh, muttered:

"I know, Lance, I know. The devils! They seem to be aware of everything we plan. Yet what can we do? Look at the territory our front lines cover! More than two thousand miles of loosely held ground. And we're so damnably organized, man! Look here!"

HE strode to the huge map which covered entirely one wall of the little room and ran his forefinger down the long red line, signifying the American front, which stretched crookedly from the Canadian border to the Gulf of California. Parallel to it was another line, of black—the United Slavs.

"It's so damned easy," Colonel Douglas said, "for a spy to slip over." He sighed again. "I fought in the scrap of 1917 as a kid of twenty; it was different then. But this is 1938, and it's a scientific war we're trying to fight." He sat down in his swivel chair. "How—how did they wipe you out to-day?"

"That blasted disintegrating flame again," Lance told him swiftly. "It's obvious, Colonel: how did the Slavs know we were going to raid that comparatively unimportant base of theirs at such and such a time? They had the flame shooters all ready for us—and at a place where they've never had them before! We came up at twenty-five thousand feet, dropped down in a full power dive, and"—he gestured widely—"biff! The flames caught us neatly at the regulation thousand feet. They got thirteen men. Only two got

away, Praed and myself." His keen eyes were inquiring, and the colonel interpreted their look correctly.

"Praed," he murmured. "Yes, I saw him come back, by himself. He said you were following. Two of his motors were shot. He seems to bear a charmed life, doesn't he?"

Lance nodded. He didn't like to hint at the thought he had in mind. It seemed a cowardly, stab-in-the-back thing to do. Yet it was duty, and there was no questioning duty.

"I've never seen Praed shoot down an enemy plane," he said slowly. "This is the fifth time we've been ambushed —and Praed's never been caught. Somehow, he's always seemed to be aware of what was coming."

"You mean—?" the colonel questioned.

Lance shook his head. "I don't want to commit myself, Colonel Douglas, but—I'm suggesting that we—well—keep our eyes peeled, and perhaps watch certain members of the outfit more closely."

DOUGLAS rose as his orderly, Ranth, came into the room. "Find Lieutenant Praed for me," the colonel ordered crisply. Then, turning to Lance, he said: "You'd better knock off a few hours' sleep. You are worn out."

Lance watched the orderly, Ranth, salute and leave. Ranth was heavy, thick-built, with closely set eyes. The young squadron leader was suddenly conscious that he was, as the colonel said, worn out; his limbs seemed leaden, his eyelids heavy. "I think you're right, sir," he murmured, and walked out onto the field.

Seeing Praed's machine drawn up with the overall-clad figure of a mechanic fussing at its motors, he wandered over to survey it. The scout was an exact replica of his, a model of the famous Goshawk type. It was all motor—everything being sacrificed to speed. On either side of the stubby brow of the fuselage, which held the death-dealing battery of three machine-guns, were set the four Rahl-Diesel motors, back to back. The pilot's tiny enclosed cockpit was thus surrounded by engines. In the V-shaped, smooth-lined wings were the two helicopter props; further back, inside the steel-sheathed, bulletlike fuselage, the radio outfit and fuel tanks. The craft's rounded belly covered the gas bomb compartment.

The mechanic was a little cockney Englishman, a fugitive, like all his countrymen, from the horror which had stricken England suddenly and left her wallowing in her life blood. He looked up at Lance, and a smile broke forth on his wizened, sharp little face.

"It's got me beat, sir," he said in his curious, twanging voice. "Lieutenant Praed, 'e sez to me, 'Somethin' wrong with two of me motors,' 'e sez. 'They quit on me quite sudden like. Look 'em over, will you?' 'e sez. So I been lookin' 'em over. But they ain't nothin' wrong with the bloody things, sir—nothin' at all!"

"It does seem funny, doesn't it, Wells?" Lance said levelly. He'd known it all along. Praed was a quitter—a yellow-belly—besides being—But he stopped there. He had no definite proof. It was unjust to accuse a man of *that* without definite, positive proof.

The little mechanic muttered some mysterious cockney curse, and then said, in an admiring tone:

" 'Ow many of the swines' planes 'ave you shot down now, sir?"

"About twenty, I think," Lance told him gruffly. The cockney shot his breath out with a whistle.

"Cripes! You'll be up to that there Captain Hay soon if you keeps it up, sir!"

Lance laughed. Hay, the almost legendary hero of the American Air Force—who had shot down, so latest rumors said, fifty Slav planes—was far above him. "I'll never reach Hay's record, Wells. I'll be doing pretty well if I bag half as many!" Then, seeing

Ranth, the orderly, followed by Praed, he strode quickly away and came face to face with the latter.

FOR a moment the two men eyed each other, a taut silence between them. Praed's thin, sun-blackened countenance was immovable, masklike. His blue-green eyes met Lance's steadily. Finally Lance snorted and burst out:

"Why the hell did you run away, Praed? Scared stiff?"

Praed's low voice, devoid of all trace of emotion, asked: "What makes you think I was scared, Lance?"

"You know damn well what makes me think it! That lbusy crack about your motors being shot!"

"Two of my motors were limping."

Lance gave a sarcastic chuckle. "Ask Wells about that, why don't you? He's got a few ideas on the subject."

Praed repeated: "Two of my motors were limping," and abruptly he turned away, leaving Lance fuming, and went into Colonel Douglas' office.

What would Douglas say to him? Accuse him outright of his suspicions? Put him under arrest as a spy? But he couldn't do that: there was, after all, no proof. Lance swore to himself; then, feeling a wave of weariness surge over him, went to the shack he was quartered in, kicked off his battered boots, stripped away his Sam Browne, and flung his lean body out on the hard, gray-sheeted cot. Seconds later he was lost in the sleep that comes to the physically exhausted. The desperate situation America was in, the whole savage war—everything, faded from his mind.

But to right and left of that cot stretched others—empty. The brave squadron Lance had led into the blue sky that morning now lay charred skeletons around the flame-throwers that had struck them down.

And in a dozen other aircraft bases behind the hard pressed lines were other empty cots. Time and time again the Slav planes shot down two to the Americans' one; time and time again the treacherous disintegrating flames—the weapon which baffled America's scientists—had struck down whole squadrons that had been lured into traps, even as Lance's had been lured.

And ever the Slav forces pushed forward.

PART II

"YOU'RE wanted by Colonel Douglas, sir."

Lance felt a hand jarring his shoulder; he turned sleepily over, yawned, and stared up into the dark, full-cheeked face of Ranth, the orderly.

"Huh?"

"Colonel Douglas wants you," repeated Ranth. "It's five o'clock, sir."

Wearily Lance pulled on his boots and adjusted the military belt. The night was hot and sticky; somewhere, miles to the rear of the base, the batteries of long-distance guns were beginning their nightly serenade. Lance followed the orderly's broad, chunky back to the colonel's office.

The colonel gazed up with tired eyes from the welter of maps on his desk.

"Lance," he said, "I'm changing the routine of the night patrol. A fresh batch of youngsters came in this afternoon to fill the empty files; two dozen new planes arrived by transport, too. I'm sending ten of them over for the night patrol; Stephens will take your place. I've got another errand for you —and Praed."

Lance was conscious that Ranth was standing quietly behind the colonel's chair. Douglas ordered him to attend to some errand and the orderly left.

"I had an interview with Praed," the colonel went on. "I didn't exactly accuse him of anything definite, but I think I threw a bit of a scare into him. To-night we'll give him the acid test.

"You and he will fly over to-night to investigate Hill 333. There have been rumors that the Slavs are massing there, and we want positive information. There's sure to be a fight. Watch Praed carefully. If he steers clear of

any scrapping, we'll have enough to court-martial him on. Understand?"

Lance nodded.

"Right. It's a dangerous errand, Lance, but I'm confident you'll come through, as always. There's no one else who could handle the job. God, man, you're getting close to Hay's record! You'll be the top-notcher of the service soon!"

The young man laughed briefly. "No danger of that. When do we take off, sir?"

Douglas consulted his watch. "Seven-fifteen. Come and get the dope from these maps. Hill 333's rather difficult to find."

"Anything been happening at the front, sir?"

The colonel passed both fine-fingered hands over his lined face. He said quietly: "Yes. The Slavs took twenty-five miles from us down in the lower sector. Just wiped our boys out. Those damnable flame-throwers and bullet-proof tanks, supported by God knows how many hundreds of planes. It's hell, Lance! Headquarters thinks they're going to unleash a general attack all along the line in the next few days. And our resources—well, our back's against the wall. We're coming to death grips, man."

SEVEN-FIFTEEN. . . .

Lance pressed the starting button. His four motors choked, sputtered, then burst into a sweet, full-throated roar. He glanced over at Praed's plane, spun the small helicopter props over and pushed down the accelerator. The plane quivered, stuck its snout up and leaped like an arrow into the clean, darkening air. Lance gunned it to ten thousand feet, Praed following him neatly. Praed was a good pilot, no doubt about that. The two fighting machines hung for a second side by side; Lance eased off his helicopters and streaked away into the gloom at a breath-taking five hundred.

"I hope," muttered Colonel Douglas as the two tiny scouts sped from sight, "that everything goes smoothly. They're the men to do it, anyway. No better pilots in the whole service."

"Wot abaht that there Captain Hay, sir?" put in Wells, the mechanic, standing nearby. Colonel Douglas smiled.

"Oh, of course!" he amended. "I'd forgotten Hay!"

Once more they were anticipated! Lance, at thirty thousand feet—the Rahl-Diesels, with their perfected superchargers, were easily capable of a ceiling of sixty—had hovered above the position of Hill 333, pulled on his gas-mask and said through the microphone to Praed:

"Power dive to three thousand feet. Release your flares and take in all you can before they send up planes. We'll take 'em by surprise, but there's bound to be a fight. Got it?"

The steady reply came back: "Okay."

Whereat Lance set his teeth in his customary fighting grin, jockied up his ammunition belts, glanced at the flare-parachutes folded alongside the cabin and plunged the scout in a dive that tipped six hundred and fifty miles and threatened to crack the speed dial.

BUT surprise? Nothing doing!

Like angry hornets five Slav planes pounced on them at ten thousand feet. They'd been waiting there! Lance cursed savagely. He flung off his flares, Immelmanned up, and in less than two seconds had sent one Slav shrieking to the ground in flames. For the moment forgetting Praed, Lance followed after his flares, three Slavs attempting to sight their guns on the twisting, writhing, corkscrewing body of his Goshawk. He knew there were disintegrating flame-throwers below, but gambled on their not shooting because of the enemy scouts diving with him.

Flattening out at perhaps a thousand feet, Lance threw a rapid stare at the bulk of Hill 333. He drew his breath in sharply.

Lit dazzlingly by the bleaching white of the slow-floating flares, huge rows

of the dreaded Slav tanks were clustered all around the hill!

As he looked, ten more Slav planes came soaring up from the ground. This was too hot! The thought of Praed stabbed through Lance's whirling brain; he pulled the scout around, doubled over the three closing in on his tail, and belched lead for an instant at one he'd caught off guard. It collapsed like a punctured paper bag. Lance grinned and bounded to the upper regions. The two other Slavs let the crazy Yank go for the instant, joining forces with the ten brothers coming to help them out.

Lance, again at ten thousand, looked for Praed. Far above, he glimpsed two planes, circling and diving. Praed seemed to be fighting, at any rate! As he watched, the two scouts catapulted still higher; became tiny, almost imperceptible dots, visible only in the reflected light of the flares. Then Lance felt a shaft of ice along his spine.

The two planes had practically hugged each other for a second. Then one of them fell away, somersaulted, tumbled down wildly—out of control.

It passed Lance like a falling rock.

And it was Praed's scout!

"My God!" muttered Lance. "He's been shot down!"

THE next moment the twelve Slavs were on him like a hurricane. Motors roaring, Lance stood them off—flinging a burst of lead here, dropping out of range here, looping, catapulting, zooming—fazing them with every trick he knew. A dozen times he sensed the singing wrath of storms of bullets, a dozen times he escaped death by the breadth of a hair. Not for nothing was he called one of the best pilots in the service, second only to Hay.

He bagged another of the Slavs, and began to think of getting away. Praed had proved himself, but had been killed in doing so. He's got the dope on Hill 333. Now for the getaway.

As he whirled, another Slav plane—the one that had got Praed—dove down from above. And, in the last second of the ghostly light of the flares, Lance's bewildered eyes saw the face of the man inside it.

That face was Praed's!

Praed, inside an enemy scout! Praed, firing at him! Praed, not dead!

Lance was dumbfounded. He almost died, just then, for he felt his senses stagger, and relaxed his maneuvering. Praed! What—how— He couldn't begin to reckon it out.

If the flares hadn't died at that instant, Lance must have been shot down. Luckily, they expired; pitch darkness washed over everything. The lights on the Slav planes switched on, their prying beams fingering the sky for Lance's plane. But Lance was somewhat himself again. He jammed the accelerator down, dove headlong, flattened out and streaked for home. The speed of the Goshawk snatched him faithfully from the jaws of the Slavs. He left them milling behind. Left Praed with them!

COLONEL DOUGLAS was waiting for him. Lance's face must have been a study, for the elder man laughed shortly. "You need a drink!" he decided, and poured out a stiff tot of rum. Lance downed it with a nervous gulp and sprawled in a chair, the glass held weakly in quivering fingers.

Dead silence brooded over the whole base. Even the muttering guns were still. One green-shaded light threw the maps on Douglas' desk into glaring prominence; besides that, there was no illumination anywhere in the 'drome. Lance knew he had a thumping headache and that his eyes were lumps of pain. The glass fell from his hand and crashed on the floor. It seemed to stir the young captain, for at last he looked up and met the colonel's inquiring gaze.

"Well?" The colonel was terse.

"I saw Praed shot down," Lance mumbled, as if to himself, "and then I saw him—"

"Wait!" Douglas strode rapidly to the door which led to the other rooms

of the building. After glancing to right and left, with an explanatory "Walls sometimes have ears, you know!" he locked the door carefully again, came back, and said:

"Talk in a whisper! How about Hill 333?"

"Tanks massed there," Lance said slowly. "Yeh, I saw that, all right. They must be intending an attack on that sector. But—but—Praed—"

"What happened?"

Lance told him of the scrap, how Praed's plane had apparently rubbed wings with a Slav and then tumbled down, out of control. He concluded: "I figured that Praed was all right, that he'd proved himself, that he wasn't a spy, as we'd thought. *But the next moment I saw him in the Slav plane that had bagged his!*"

His wondering eyes sought the colonel's lean face. Lance expected to see it express amazement, incredulity. It didn't, though. He laughed!

WHILE Lance gaped, the older man went to the delicate machinery of the radiophone in one corner of the trim office. He clasped the earphones over his head, and spoke into the mike: "Headquarters, Air Force, Washington. Douglas, Base 5, speaking."

A tense moment passed while his radio call was put through. Presently a green light flashed on the board. Douglas said swiftly: "Headquarters? Base 5, Colonel Douglas. Tanks massed around Hill 333; enemy evidently contemplates full attack on corresponding sector of our line. They know a scout of ours observed it, however; perhaps that will induce them to change their plans. This next is extremely important: *The first step of the Torpedo Plan has been successful.*"

For awhile he listened intently, replying with short-clipped affirmatives. Then he hung the headphones up and turned to the bewildered Lance. Colonel Douglas laughed again and rubbed his hands exultantly.

"What the hell—" Lance began. The other pulled out a drawer of his desk and took from it a small placard.

"Do you recognize the photo?" he asked smilingly.

Lance looked at it. It was the picture of a man in the uniform of a captain of the Air Force, a row of battle ribbons on his straight, khaki-clad chest. But it was the figure's face that Lance stared at.

"Sure," he said finally. "It's a picture of Praed. But what—"

"Not Praed," corrected the colonel. "Not Praed. Captain Basil Hay."

PART III

"GOOD Lord!" Lance exclaimed without knowing he did so. Praed—Hay! The same man! Then that was the secret; that explained things! Hay, the hero of the force!

"You're entitled to a few explanations," Douglas said. "I'll give you the core of the whole scheme. There's no need to tell you that it must be guarded with your life." He drew his chair closer to Lance's.

"Yes, it's true. The man you knew as Praed in reality is Captain Hay. You see, Lance, headquarters was taking no chances with what I just called the Torpedo Plan. Every move had to be conducted with the utmost secrecy. Had to be! For the Torpedo Plan is, in some ways, America's last hope.

"Our base, No. 5, was chosen as the center of activity, the base from which the steps paving the way for the plan would be taken. The two best pilots in the service were needed. You and Hay were chosen.

"It was decided it would be best to mask Hay's real identity. So, officially, he was sent to the hospital; in reality he came here, under the name of Praed. Why? Because there's a spy somewhere—we don't seem to be able to track him; he's infernally clever—and if the famous Captain Hay was

switched to Base 5, putting the two best pilots in the service together, that spy'd know something was in the air. Understand?"

Lance nodded dumbly. A great light was beginning to shower him.

"To more completely mask our true purpose," the colonel continued, "Hay was instructed to make it appear as if he were a spy. And it was a damned hard job! The real spy, whoever he is, and wherever he is, would thus be additionally fooled; for all he'd know, the Slavs might have sent another over to back him up. That's why Hay never shot down an enemy plane. Says something about his skill as a pilot, doesn't it? Never able to defend himself, save by maneuvering. He's a great flyer!"

Lance could only nod dumbly again.

"After a couple of weeks at this base," Douglas went on, "Hay was to cross the lines one night with you accompanying him. You, unintentionally, would thus occupy the enemy planes while Hay attended to the real business of the evening. And you did splendidly!"

"The real business?" Lance questioned. "What the devil was that? I thought the real business was to get the dope on Hill 333."

"So it was—partially. But also to take the first step of the Torpedo Plan, which was for Hay to switch over to a Slav plane."

"*What?*"

THE colonel repeated his statement, somewhat dryly. Lance's square jaw dropped abruptly. "But—but—" he exclaimed, "how the devil could he do that?"

Colonel Douglas grinned.

"By a very neat contraption from the brain of one of our most valuable scientists," he explained. "Hay's scout was specially fitted up before you left; while you were sleeping, in fact. Two experts from Washington arrived with that batch of new recruits this afternoon. A tiny sliding door was cut in the fuselage of the scout and a sort of folding ladder put inside. It was motivated by some rather complex springwork; but the really ingenious thing about it was the powerful electro-magnet at its base.

"It's rather over my head," he smiled. "I'm a plain fighting man, and sometimes it seems that scientists and not fighting men are going to win this war. . . But, at any rate, it worked like this:

"Hay lures, or maneuvers, a Slav plane away from its fellows, and while you're down below entertaining the others, flies wing to wing with it. He touches the spring of his ladder and it shoots out, powerfully magnetized, and clamps onto the steel fuselage of the Slav. The automatic control keeps Hay's scout steady, and the ladder is so highly attractive that the Slav simply can't get away. Hay crosses the gulf, taking with him the cord which controls the electro-magnet. He forces his way into the Slav, shoots down its pilot, releases the pull of the magnet, and—there you are! Our best pilot in possession of a Slav plane, and clad in a Slav officer's uniform! Do you get the idea now?"

Lance strove for appropriate words. "Gee!" he spluttered. "It's—it's wonderful! And to think I tried to start a fight with Hay! I wish I'd known before. But I suppose," he added," it was best to let not even me in on it, to keep it absolutely secret."

"Exactly!"

"And now what's Hay's mission?" Lance asked eagerly.

COLONEL DOUGLAS' face became sober. "A damnably dangerous one, and a mighty desperate one. As I said, the Torpedo Plan, which Hay is striving to carry out, seems to be America's last chance. We're holding the United Slavs, but only just. We simply can't break their line or make any headway against them; and when they do unleash their big push, there's nothing to stop them!

So we're gambling everything on this slim hope.

"American science," he continued, "has perfected a weapon which is called the 'flying torpedo.' It's a ghastly thing, too. Damn it, I actually feel sorry for the poor devils it bursts on! It's a sort of riposte to their disintegrating flame.

"Picture a huge tanklike affair of steel, one hundred feet long. Picture a few dozen of them! Picture them crammed to overflowing with tons of glyco-scarzite, the most destructive explosive the mind of man has yet conceived. An explosive that can't be hurled in a shell and can't be dropped in a bomb from a plane. A pound or so of it, man, lays waste a square mile of anything! Even our scientists are a bit afraid of it. They've been trying to think up a way of unleashing it at the Slavs. And these flying torpedoes seem to be the answer.

"The torpedoes are purely mechanical. Therefore, they can soar to any height whatsoever. Twenty, thirty, even forty miles. All right. Now, picture a dozen or so of these torpedoes soaring over the most important Slav bases and headquarters, thirty miles above the earth, at night, of course, and absolutely invisible to the most powerful search-rays. They fly without the slightest sound. Get that? Well, when this squadron of awful death arrives at the exact point over the place to be demolished, the motive force switches off and down they crash. Imagine what will happen when they collide with the ground!" Douglas, with Lance's tense eyes on him, struck a clenched fist into an open palm.

"Tons of glyco-scarzite, Lance! Unleashed, without warning, from miles above! Thirty of these torpedoes, each a hundred feet long, dropping down on the very heart of the Slav invasion! Killing, blowing to bits, rather, every living thing, every fortification, every tree, every tank, every gun, every flame thrower, every plane in a radius of hundreds of miles!"

"God!" came from Lance's numb lips. "God!"

"*But*"—and the colonel held up a straight forefinger—"these torpedoes must be guided from the place they raid!"

Into the silence Lance whispered: "And that—that is Hay's job?"

"That," Douglas confirmed levelly, "is Hay's job—and yours."

THEIR eyes met; held. And then Lance's clean young face smiled.

"Thank God, sir," he cried, "that I'm to help strike the blow that'll free our country!"

Colonel Douglas answered his smile with a smile. "Lance," he said, "it's because Washington has put this job into Hay's and your hands that I know —*I know*—it will succeed."

"It will!"

Douglas lowered his voice again. "This is why those flying torpedoes must be guided from the Slav's innermost base.

"In the first place, they fly too high for an accompanying plane to guide them. In the second, the power that releases them to hurtle downwards must come from the enemy base itself, to permit of no possible error. This must not fail!"

"But," put in Lance, "how do the torpedoes fly? What motivates them?"

"A closely guarded secret, of course," he was told. "I merely possess a slight comprehension of it. I know that it is an adaptation of that discovery of Professor Singe, two years ago—cosmic attraction. Eventually, perhaps, it will permit interplanetary travel. This use of it is simply the beginning. But it is to America's everlasting glory that a scientist of hers developed it.

"You know how a sliver of wood is propelled by the ripples of a pond? Vibrations of the water, really. Well, evidently there are somewhat similar vibrations in the ether, cosmic force. Each one of these flying torpedoes contains a highly expensive, intricate mechanism which transforms this in-

visible vibration-power into material propulsion. The mechanism is adjusted to propel the torpedo at such an altitude in such a direction. We possess no means of setting the machines to *stop* at a certain place and so tumble earthwards. That's where you and Hay come in.

"Hay is now, with forged documents, passing himself off as a regular Slav pilot. He speaks the tongue. Two nights from now, you, Lance, keep a rendezvous with Hay at an isolated ranch in the Lake Tahoe country—the Sola Ranch, where we staged that big fight a few months back."

LANCE nodded.

"In your plane is an instrument which is the kernel of the scheme. It arrives here to-morrow. It's a device which shoots an invisible beam fifty miles into the air, a negative beam, in sympathy with the machinery on the torpedoes. Hay sets this device near the Slav headquarters. The torpedo squadron takes off from a few hundred miles behind here, flying in the direction of the heart of the Slav forces. When they run into the beam, their motive power is nullified, and down they fall. Crash! The Slavs are wiped out. Our troops charge forward in a grand attack; the Slavs, with no armament, no reinforcing troops, no supply of tanks and flame throwers, crumple. The invasion of America is put to an end!"

Lance rose. His face was alight, his eyes burning with strong, unquenchable fire.

"It's great, sir, great! It can't fail! By God, if it takes every last drop of my blood, I'll help Hay put this through!"

Colonel Douglas extended his right hand and Lance's met it in a firm shake. In the thick silence they stood thus for some minutes. Then, without moving so much as a cheek muscle, the colonel whispered, his eyes tense:

"The door! Fling it open! I think someone's been listening!"

Lance switched his alarmed gaze to it. His muscles went taut. The next moment he had leaped half across the room, jammed back the lock, and ripped the door wide.

At the other end of the dim passageway he glimpsed a scurrying figure!

Lance sprang after it with a shout to Douglas. Tearing out his automatic, he flung a burst of lead at the figure, but that instant it wheeled and sped from sight down another passage. And when Lance got there, no one was in sight.

FOR awhile he probed around, desperately, but could find no sign of anything. The base slept. Sorely troubled, he returned to find the colonel just coming back from an equally barren search.

"Don't think he heard much," said Douglas grimly. "It must have been that damned spy who's been getting information of our movements. I'll have the guards redoubled to prevent him from getting anything through." He smiled at sight of Lance's anxious face. "No need for too much worry, Lance! He couldn't have heard much—the walls are sound-proof and the door fairly tight. Now, you go and rip off some sleep! You need it! No more work for you till Wednesday night—you're too important!"

Sleep! Lance only wished he could. But the thrill of what he'd just heard was too fresh, too new; the blood pumped surgingly through his veins; his brain whirled with the thought of the glorious enterprise he and Hay were aiding so vitally.

Then, too, the night was humid and sweaty. For a while Lance lay on his cot, other sleeping figures to left and right of him, but his own eyes simply would not stay closed. Finally, after perhaps an hour of trying to doze off, he arose and, clad only in breeches and undershirt, wandered outside again with a cigarette glowing in his mouth.

The war might not have been, the night was so silent. Lance strolled

lazily around the plane hangars, revelling in what little breeze there was. He seemed to be the only living thing abroad in the night.

Then, suddenly, he flung down his cigarette and ground the butt out quickly. For he saw he was not the only living thing abroad in the night. Sliding rapidly away from the end hangar was a dark form!

Lance crouched instinctively and crept forward. Who was the other wanderer? Not a sentry: they paced a regular beat closer to Douglas' office. Not another, who, like himself, could not sleep and had sought the open. This figure was going somewhere! It had a definite object in mind!

Sheltering himself behind the hangars' bulk, Lance advanced as stealthily as he could. Coming to the end one, he peered round its blunt corner. Fifty yards ahead, crossing a stubbly stretch of open ground, the mysterious prowler hurried onward.

THE night was dark, the moon troubled by ragged bursts of listless, heavy clouds. Lance bent almost double and left the shelter of the black hangar. Feeling his way carefully, he followed the other.

Was this the unknown spy? The spy, going to transmit the news he had overheard?

Lance muttered a curse. He had no weapon with him; the spy, if he were a spy, would certainly be armed. But that didn't matter; it was merely unfortunate. He must track the other down, at all cost.

For some minutes he crept on in this manner. The other kept hurrying forward. Lance noted a clump of brush far ahead; the figure was evidently making for this. And sure enough, as if acting directly on Lance's thought, the dark form entered the patch of growth—and did not come out on the other side.

Lance broke into a trot, eyes wary and alert for sign of his prey. At any second he might be greeted by a salvo of bullets, and every fiber of his lean body was taut.

As he approached the clump of brush he dropped to the ground, and came finally to it on his belly. From a distance of about ten feet, he rose and charged.

Expecting each moment to hear the spit of a revolver, he was more alarmed by what actually did greet him.

Nothing. The patch of brush was empty!

"Well I'll be damned!" Lance murmured. "Where did he get to?"

He gazed around, bewildered. The growth of bush was about ten feet wide. On either side the flat Nevada plain stretched away—empty. No figure was visible.

Lance was utterly baffled. The fellow had vanished as if by magic. Flown away into thin air!

THE young captain stood quite still, listening, probing his puzzled brain.

Then, like a cat, he dropped to the ground again, and pressed an ear to it. For his ears had caught a tiny betraying hum.

A hum! There was a machine of some type near him. He listened intently. The hum came from the ground on which he lay. There had to be a trap-door.

Lance's fingers scrabbled around, and presently found what they looked for.

He seized the ring which enabled one to pull the trap-door back, and was just about to pull when he heard, from below, a voice speaking in Russian. It was, then, the spy!

Lance grasped the ring anew, and, exerting all his strength, hauled the trap-door back.

A narrow passageway was revealed, lit by a lamp. The hum burst with doubled force on his ears. He plunged down, fists clenched, and half tumbled into a tiny room gouged from the soil.

At one end was a mass of machinery, and a microphone hung suspended before it. And speaking into the micro-

phone was the heavy-set form of a man in American uniform, his back to Lance. As the latter charged down, he rose with an alarmed shout, and wheeled around.

"My God!" breathed Lance.

It was Ranth, Colonel Douglas' orderly!

RANTH!

His dark face flushed with fury, he came leaping from his seat. The wicked little revolver hung at his belt sprang out, but Lance's right fist shot forward, knocked Ranth's hand high and sent the gun clattering to the ground. Then, for a moment, they faced each other, the hum of the radiophone droning an ominous accompaniment.

"You!" Lance muttered. "So you were the spy!"

Ranth answered him with a choked oath and leaped forward again.

There were no niceties to that combat. It was a matter of life and death, and each knew it. Ranth would kill him, Lance knew, if he possibly could; and he, he had to kill or capture Ranth. Otherwise the news of the Torpedo Plan would go through, Ranth would return to the base, and the secret of the hidden radio never be known. Another would be put in Lance's place; and when Hay kept his rendezvous at Sola Ranch. . .

He had to win.

No effort was made at defense, for those first few furious minutes. A veritable fusillade of hurtling fists stormed through the air. They each gave and took equally. Then Ranth's heavy shoulders bunched; cunningly he feinted, then, whirling, swung a vicious right hand smash to Lance's chin.

Lance reeled, fell, seeing Ranth's hate-contorted visage dance queerly in the close air before him. The orderly clutched for his revolver, and Lance bounded up as if spring-impelled, nailed the other with two lightninglike jabs and unleashed all his strength in an uppercut which sprawled Ranth in a limp, quivering heap.

PANTING, Lance surveyed him, then turned to get the gun. He felt the shock of thudding flesh in his legs, and fell again with Ranth scrambling on top of him. Steel-ribbed hands pounced on his throat, gouged savagely, while the man above grunted thick curses from his slavering mouth. Lance struggled fiercely; saw a curtain of black rush down. Desperately he hooked a booted leg up, craned it over Ranth's back, tugged. The terrible fingers loosened. Lance shook them off, rolled the other over and leaped once more to his feet, right hand clenched and ready.

Ranth staggered up. The young man measured him, pivoted, and smashed his beefy jaw with a clean swing that had every ounce of Lance's hard young body behind it.

The orderly shot back as if struck by a locomotive. He crashed into the radiophone, splintered the delicate instruments and slumped, eyes glazed, to the ground.

He was out. Dead out.

But how much had he got through on the radiophone before being stopped?

Had he told where the rendezvous was to be? Told the time and place, and warned the Slavs to look for Hay?

Lance sighed, and was conscious that his left eye was rapidly closing, that a lip was split and his whole body sore. He slung Ranth over his shoulders and trudged wearily back to the base.

He told his story to Colonel Douglas' amazed ears. Ranth, come back to life, was clapped in handcuffs, and for some time the colonel put him through a stern inquisition.

But his lips were sealed. He would not divulge how much he had succeeded in passing on to the Slavs.

"A brave man," Douglas observed grimly when Ranth was carried off to the brig, "but it's death for him, the same as it would be death for Hay were he caught."

"I don't think he had a chance to get much across, sir," Lance said. "I was right on him almost as soon as he got there. You won't let this cancel our rendezvous?"

Douglas' thin lips smiled narrowly. "No. You'll be taking a greater chance, Lance, but we must gamble on how much the Slavs know. You're game, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir!"

WEDNESDAY night came.

Thunderstorms muttered to each other on the lowering horizons; gusts of fierce, wind-driven rain slanted down on the dripping base; occasionally a crooked finger of lightning probed the black sky and lit the whole sopping countryside with a searing, flashing glare.

The night patrol had taken off. A single plane, wet and gleaming under the sobbing heavens, stood on the tarmac, two heavily coated figures before it. Presently three more figures, carrying some bulky black object carefully between them, emerged from one of the buildings. Tenderly they placed this object in the lone plane, which had been stripped of radio outfit and gas bomb compartment to provide room. Then the two original figures were left alone once more before the fighting machine. Far to the rear, the heavy American guns barked in their regular nightly bombardment.

"A good night for it," Colonel Douglas, scanning the sky, said, "and also a bad one. If only that damned lightning would stop!"

Lance, pulling on thick gloves, did not reply. The colonel consulted his watch.

"What time do you make it?" he asked.

"Exactly eight," the other answered.

"Right. At eight-six, you leave. At nine, on the dot, you meet Hay at Sola Ranch. At nine-ten, the torpedoes take off. At quarter to ten, they arrive over their destination—San Francisco and the surrounding territory. And quarter to ten, if things go correctly—which they must!—is the minute that ends the Slavish invasion of America. At ten minutes to ten, five minutes after the torpedoes strike, our troops charge forward in general attack. God be with you, Lance! The fate of America is resting on your shoulders tonight, remember!"

"I'm remembering."

COLONEL DOUGLAS looked at the young man's grim, set face, looked at his lithe, clean-limbed figure and his steady black eyes which burned with a purposeful fire. And the colonel smiled.

"We'll win!" he said.

An orderly sped from his office, saluted, and rapped crisply:

"Order just received from Washington, sir, to proceed."

Lance clasped Douglas' hand, and leaped into the snug, enclosed cockpit. The four motors bellowed as the thin-sprayed oil cascaded to them. The helicopter props spun around.

"Go to it, kid!" cried Douglas. "Spy or no spy, you're coming out on top! And give Hay a last handshake for me!"

And he swung to the salute.

Lance extended his hand. Then he gave his ship the gun, and the tiny, streamlined scout teetered, roared, and rose with a scream into the dripping darkness high above.

The Torpedo Plan had started.

PART IV

LANCE hung for a moment at one thousand feet. A crack of lightning lit the base below for a second, and he perceived the colonel's straight figure with hand outstretched. Lance grinned, and gunned to forty thousand—an easy flying height, with his superchargers pumping and air-rectifiers normalizing the enclosed pilot's seat.

"But what," he wondered, as he stopped the helicopters, "did he mean by 'give a *last* handshake'?"

He was soon to find out.

Behind him, in the fuselage, nestled the weird cluster of machinery which was the Singe beacon. It certainly did not look imposing—a mass of spidery tubes mazing round a bulky black box, which was, Lance guessed, some new type of generator. Out of the top of the device sprouted a funnel-like horn, from which, on the adjustment of the beacon's control studs, shot the nullifying ray. Lance could not suppress a shiver as he thought of the earth-shaking cataclysm that ray would conjure from the infinitely high heavens.

At forty thousand feet he was above the storm clouds, whose pitchy, vapor-drenched blackness effectively blanked out all sign of the earth. He might have been flying in outer space. Keeping a careful eye on his instruments, he set a course for Sola Ranch. He kept his speed around three hundred, wishing to meet Hay exactly at nine.

But—would Hay be there?

How much did the Slavs know? How much had Ranth got through before he stopped him?

A frown creased his brow. It was best not to puzzle over that question. Best just to go ahead, and keep going.

AT about three minutes to nine he set the plane's nose down through veils of clammy cloud. This was mountainous country, sparsely patrolled by Slav ships. Lance hovered cautiously over the firred mountain tops, getting his directions, shooting wary eyes through the magnifying mirrors in search of enemy scouts. He saw none. Satisfied, he cut the Rahl-Diesels, gunned the helicopter props and dropped lightly down on the stubbly field of Sola Ranch.

To left and right loomed the dim outlines of the lonely mountains. Before the war, the owner of Sola Ranch had grown apples; this field had housed a few horses. It made a perfect meeting place—secluded, misty with the clinging mountain vapors, far apart from the war.

Lance felt like a prowling werewolf there, waiting for its ghostly mate.

Rain was still splattering in desultory bursts, but distance muted the rumbling salvos of thunder. His watch told him it was one minute to nine.

Now—what?

Hay, or a swooping squadron of Slav planes?

Lance stepped out of the cockpit into the rain, though holding himself tensely ready to leap back again and soar away. He stared around, and peered above.

Was that a shadow?—a nightmare flying bird?—or a plane?

He grasped a hand-flash, and rapidly signalled his identity. The next instant, it seemed, the shadow wavered, then fell earthward with great speed.

Out of the gloom and rain it came—an enemy plane.

It dropped down beside his scout. From its cockpit came a few swift flashes of light.

Hay!

LANCE ran eagerly over to the other plane, and out from its enclosed cabin stepped the man he had known as Praed.

Wordlessly, they gripped hands. Hay's thin, straight face wore a smile, and he met Lance's eyes keenly. Lance stammered:

"S-sorry, Captain Hay, about—about the way I treated you at the base. You see, I had no idea who you were."

Hay cut short his apologies with a laugh. "Rot! I'd've been the same way myself." He glanced rapidly at Lance's plane. "Got it?" he questioned. "I'm a bit late; had a hell of a time getting here without arousing suspicion. We'd best hurry."

Lance nodded. They hurried to the Goshawk. As they worked, carefully lifting out the Singe beacon, Lance, in crisp, short-clipped sentences, told his companion of Ranth, the spy.

"You don't know how much he got through?"

"No," said Lance. "No."

"Hm-m. Well, we'll have to trust to luck."

"You know the working of the beacon?" Lance asked. On the other's nod of affirmation he continued: "What's your plan?"

"Light about five miles this side of Frisco itself, just near the main Slav military base. Anywhere in that territory would do, though. The beacon doesn't go up in a narrow ray; it spreads, diffuses. The squadron of torpedoes will cover some fifty or sixty miles of ground, I believe. They'll utterly demolish the city, and every damned Slav in it." His face, in the darkness, went grim and hard. "And it'll damn well pay them back," he rasped, "for the horrible way they massacred San Francisco's population. . . ."

THE Singe beacon was in his plane. Hay turned to Lance, stretching out his hand for a farewell clasp. Then Lance asked the question that had been worrying him.

"Colonel Douglas told me to give you a last handshake for him. *Last.* Why did he say that?"

"Because," Hay said smilingly, "I'm staying by the beacon to make sure that nothing goes wrong. I guess that's why he said it, old fellow. . . ."

Lance gasped: "You're sacrificing your life?"

"Of course. To save seventy-five million others."

Then suddenly they both stared above.

A roar of sound—of purring motors, of props, mixed with the chatter of a dozen machine-guns—had belched with numbing suddenness from the low-hanging clouds.

Enemy planes! A patrol of them!

"God!" jerked Lance. "Ranth's warning got through! Part of it, anyway!"

He leaped for his plane, shouting: "I'll hold 'em off! You get away *quick!*" and, through a veritable hail of lead, spring into the cockpit.

Then, a cold pang at his heart, he sprang out again.

A bullet had caught Hay!

FOR a moment, the Slav fire ceased, while their planes zoomed up to start another death-dealing dive. And in that moment Lance was at Hay's side, where he had fallen.

"They—got me," whispered Hay, a stream of blood welling from his gasping mouth. "I'm—I'm going. C-carry me to—to your plane. I've still a—a little strength left. You take the beacon. I—I'll hold them—as—as long as—I can. Put through that beacon, boy! *Put it through!*"

His brain a maelstrom, Lance stared at the crumpled figure. It was the only way! He heard the motors above come roaring down again; desperately he carried the blood-choking Hay to his own plane; propped him limply at the controls. Bullets spat through a frenzy of noise. Weakly Hay started the Goshawk's Diesels, and weakly, into Lance's face, smiled, and beckoned him to leave.

And, as Lance, a grim resolve at his heart, turned, Hay's blood-frothed lips formed the words: "Carry on!"

Through the raining lead, seeming to bear a charmed life, Lance leaped to Hay's plane, hearing as he did so his own, with a stricken pilot at its controls, hurtle upwards.

Carry on! For the life of America! Carry on!

TEN minutes past the hour of nine. A full thousand miles behind the lines, on the wide black field of America's major war base, a small group of men stood, surveying the awesome weapons assembled there.

Row upon row of huge, dully-gleaming cigar-shaped things stretched away into the darkness before them. There were only one or two faint lights to give illumination, and the night choked in on them, making them terrifying.

They resembled, more than anything else, half-sized dirigibles, being rough-

ly about one hundred feet long and perhaps as much as thirty feet high. At first sight, they seemed to be numberless; then, as the bewildered eye became more sane, one could count them and see that there were, in reality, about thirty. Their prows were stubby; in the port side of each a tiny trap-door yawned, and standing by every trap-door was the overall-clad figure of a mechanic, waiting for the signal.

The Commander of the American Air Force looked up from his wrist-watch. At his side was a peculiar gnomelike figure, a figure with hunched, twisted back and huge, over-heavy head. This was Professor Singe, and from that ridiculous head had come the germ which had finally expanded into the torpedoes arrayed before him.

His eyes were nervous; his crooked face twitched ceaselessly. "Time?" he kept asking. "Time? Is it yet time?" And finally the tall figure of the Commanding Officer turned and rapped: "Time!"

AN aide-de-camp raised a hand. As if working by some mechanical device, the figure which stood by each torpedo climbed through the trap-doors, jumped out a second later, and came running to the head of the field.

"About thirty seconds," muttered Singe nervously, eyes alight. "Thirty seconds for their motors to catch the stream. Thirty—ah!"

For the squadron of man-made horrors had stirred.

"God pity San Francisco!" murmured the Commanding Officer, and stepped back involuntarily as the whole fleet lifted their glyco-scarzite crammed bellies from the field and, as if moved by some magical, unseen, unheard force, shot up into the darkness with ever gathering speed.

"God pity it, indeed!" chuckled Singe exultantly. "It'll need it!"

The C. O. sighed and shook his head slowly. "War!" he mused. "And yet, it's our only chance." For a moment he paused, seemingly unconscious of the macabre little form next to him, still gazing aloft at the now invisible torpedoes, and then muttered:

"And God pity Basil Hay, who's giving his life to America—a glorious, unselfish hero. God pity Basil Hay!"

AMERICAN flyers never knew of Basil Hay's last fight. Had they, it would have become legendary.

For Hay fought a grim battle against two foes. One, he could face and conquer, as he had conquered often before. But the other lurked next to his dauntless heart, and it Hay could not subdue.

It was death.

Truly, Hay's fight there in the wet clouds above Sola Ranch was an inspired one. He fought almost by instinct alone, instinct twenty years of piloting had planted deep in his veins. He fought for Lance—for America. His eyes, glazing rapidly, could not distinguish the roaring phantoms that laced around his lone plane, but uncannily his bursts of fire went home again and again, while theirs ripped aimlessly over the Goshawk's hell-driven snout.

Of course it could not last. Gallant spirit alone kept Basil Hay taut at his controls. Spirit alone thrust back the ever-increasing surge of black oblivion that pounded at his heart and brain. Spirit alone sent the pitifully outnumbered plane corkscrewing in peerless maneuverings that baffled the on-passing Slavs and thrust four of them to the sodden ground in flame. Spirit that would not surrender—but had to.

They could never have conquered Basil Hay in a plane. An ambushing bullet that caught him off guard did that. And finally Hay fell.

But he had kept them for ten full minutes. Ten minutes—each one a lasting, mute testimony to his unquenchable, unyielding spirit.

He flung a last salvo from his hot machine-guns, then, heart numbing, jerked back the control-stick and careened high. He slumped down. The plane paused, wallowed crazily for a

moment, and then roared earthward, "Carry on!" formed faintly on its dead pilot's bloody lips.

Basil Hay had fought his last fight.

TEN minutes. . . .

Lance hadn't expected that long. He'd thought Hay would die in a few seconds. The man was mortally wounded; could not last.

Nevertheless, minutes or seconds, he was entrusted with the Singe beacon, and it was his job and his will to put it through.

He'd climbed the Slav plane up to its ceiling, driven it till it simply refused to go higher, and, then roared on towards San Francisco. Each second he expected to see others come hurtling after him. When they did not, he knew how really great Hay's will was. It was an inspiring example.

But his brain was tortured by a multitude of conflicting doubts. A patrol of Slav scouts had ambushed them. Just how much did the Slavs know, then, about the torpedoes?

He, Lance, had to guide the Singe beacon. Quickly he reviewed what Hay had told him.

"Light about five miles this side of Frisco. Anywhere in that territory would do, though. The beacon doesn't go up in a narrow ray; it spreads, diffuses."

Spreads, diffuses.

Hay had been clad in Slav uniform, and thus could, with a certain measure of safety, put the beacon machinery on the ground itself. But Lance was in American uniform; if he landed, he ran great risk of being noticed and attacked at once.

Lance saw immediately that there was only one way out. It was sure death, but Hay had expected death, and so must he.

His lips set in stern resolve. It meant good-by—farewell to the girl he'd left behind, farewell to life, farewell to everything—but not for a second did he debate the course he would take.

LANCE glanced at his watch. Nine-thirty. The torpedoes were even now on their way, hurtling along miles above the earth. In fifteen minutes they would be over San Francisco. In fifteen minutes the Singe beacon had to meet them.

He was not familiar with the Slav plane's instruments, but he judged he'd traveled some hundred and twenty-five miles; was nearing the outskirts of San Francisco. The air below would be thick, probably, with enemy scouts, but his appearance should pass unchallenged as long as they didn't glimpse his betraying uniform.

He set the plane's nose down in a long slanting dive.

Whipping through the clouds, the guarding search-rays of San Francisco were soon visible. Lance saw a few patrols of enemy scouts; he clung to the clouds, decreased his speed, and began circling over the heart of the metropolis itself.

Twenty to ten.

Occasionally a Slav plane flashed by him. Thank God, they didn't challenge! Lance went still lower. Finally, at a thousand feet, he set the helicopter props in motion and hung in mid-air—directly above the very center of the city.

Sixteen minutes to ten.

Now!

IN the American front-line trenches, massed troops crouched expectantly. Clustered on every air base were flights of planes, each one crammed with bombs. Far behind, the Yank gun-crews edged nervously up to their mighty charges, and fingered anxiously the stubby gas shells which soon would be flung through the dripping night.

And at Base No. 5 a very uneasy Colonel Douglas paced back and forth in his office, muttering: "No news from Lance! No news from Lance! God! He can't have failed! But why doesn't he show up?"

He had not failed.

Hovering in the plane over San

Francisco Lance squirmed round in his seat, reached back into the fuselage, and pressed rapidly the studs on the Single beacon. A high whining noise pierced instantly through the plane. And up stabbed the beacon, invisible, deadly—up, up, up to a thin realm miles above, where it flashed into an awesome squadron of terrible shells of steel!

Shells that, a second later, wavered, staggered, and plunged earthward!

And Lance tensed in his seat. From above, he caught a tiny whistling noise—a whistling that hurtled into a terrific shriek—that roared ever closer.

"Carry on!" he muttered. "Carry on!"

The words froze on his lips, for the world was suddenly consumed, it seemed, by flame and splitting, bellowing thunder.

THE American guns spoke.

From every airdrome long flights of scouts and bombers and transport planes roared upward.

In the front trenches the troops, still somewhat dazed by the earth-shaking explosion that had just tumbled from the far horizon—a horizon still lit by leaping tongues of awful flame—poured over the top, gas-masks on, repeaters and portable machine-guns at the ready, with a fierce cry on their lips.

Before that avenging attack the Slavs, their very spine broken, bewildered and confused, already turning in panic, could not stand.

America swept to the Pacific, and left death in her wake. And when she came to San Francisco, not even the sternest fighting men, still hot from battle, could repress a shudder, so awful was the devastation.

The Slav invasion was over!

IN the rebuilt city of San Francisco there is a statue that stands proudly before the magnificent, gleaming city hall.

It represents two slim, straight-standing figures, clad in the uniform of the American Air Force. Their outstretched arms support a tiny one-seater Goshawk fighting plane.

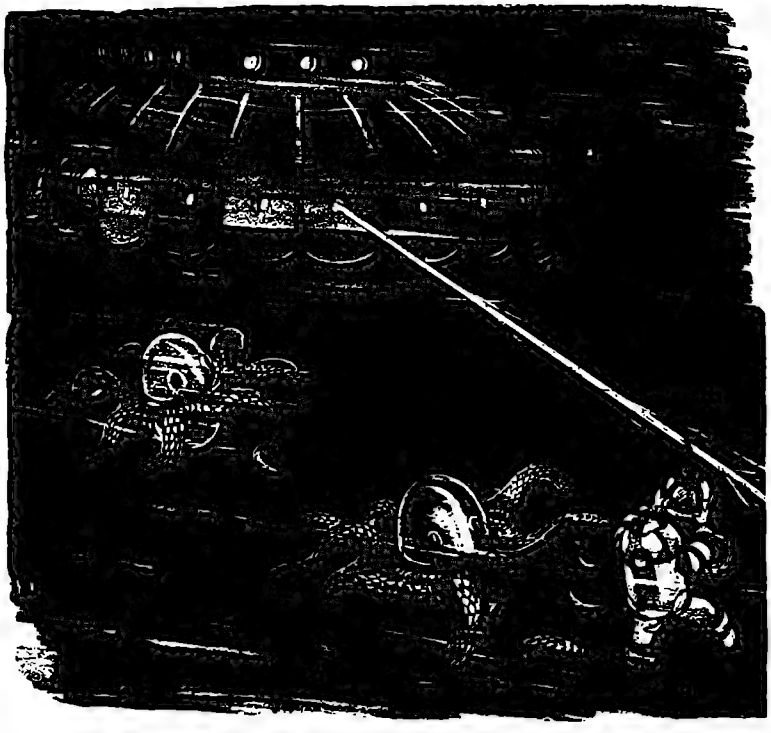
Below, as you know, there is a plaque. Men touch their hats as they walk by it; flowers are always fresh at its base. On the plaque are the words:

To The Everlasting
Memory Of
Captain Basil Hay, A.A.F.
Captain Derek Lance, A.A.F.
Who, In The War Of 1938, Gave
Their Lives In 'Destroying And
Devastating San Francisco
That San Francisco And America
Might Live

Everyone Is Invited

To "Come Over in

'THE READERS' CORNER'!"



Bowman hooked it on the hawser arm above.

The Tentacles From Below

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By Anthony Gilmore

CHAPTER I

"Machine-Fish"

"FULL stop. Rest ready."

These words glowed in vivid red against the black background of the *NX-1's* control order-board. A wheel was spun over, a lever pulled back, and in the hull of the submarine descended the peculiar silence found only in mile-deep waters. Men rested at their posts, eyes alert.

Above, in the control room, Hemingway Bowman, youthful first officer, glanced at the teleview screen and swore softly.

"Keith," he said, "between you and me, I'll be damned glad when this monotonous job's over. I joined the Navy to see the world, but this charting job's giving me entirely too many close-ups of the deadest parts of it!"

Commander Keith Wells, U. S. N., grinned broadly. "Well," he remarked, "in

Down to tremendous ocean depths goes Commander Keith Wells in his blind duel with the marauding "machine-fish."

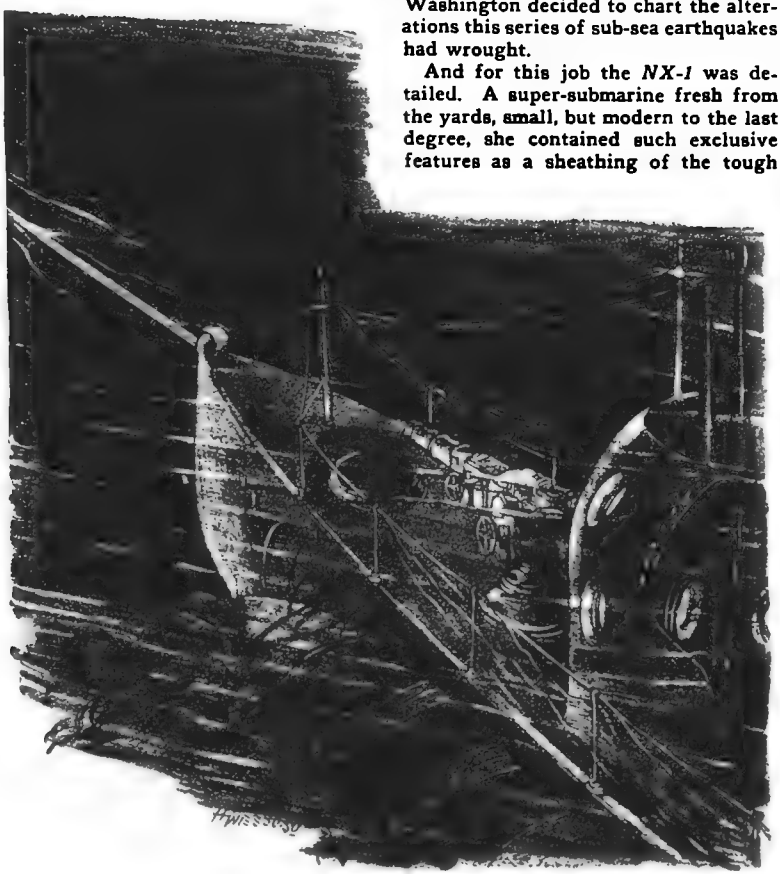
a few minutes we can call it a day —or night, rather—and then it's back to the *Falcon* while the day shift 'sees the world.'" He turned again to his dials as Hemmy Bowman, with a sigh, resumed work.

"Depth, six thousand feet. Visibility poor. Bottom eight thousand," he said into the phone hung before his lips, and fifty feet aft, in a small cubby, a blue-clad figure monotonously repeated the observations and noted them down in an official geographical survey report.

SUCH had been their routine for two tiring weeks, all part of the *NX-1's* present work of re-charting the Newfoundland banks.

As early as 1929 slight cataclysms had begun to tear up the sea-floor of this region, and of late—1935—seismographs and cable companies had reported titantic upheavals and sinkings of the ocean bed, changing hundreds of miles of underwater territory. Finally Washington decided to chart the alterations this series of sub-sea earthquakes had wrought.

And for this job the *NX-1* was detailed. A super-submarine fresh from the yards, small, but modern to the last degree, she contained such exclusive features as a sheathing of the tough



new glycosteel, automatic air rectifiers, a location chart for showing positions of nearby submarines, the newly developed Edsel electric motors, and automatic teleview screen. When below surface she was a sealed tube of metal one hundred feet long, and possessed of an enormous cruising radius. From the flower of the Navy some thirty men were picked, and in company with the mother-ship *Falcon* she put out to combine an exhaustive trial trip with the practical charting of the newly charged ocean floor.

Now this work was almost over. Keith Wells told himself that he, like Bowman, would be glad to set foot on land again. This surveying was important, of course, but too dry for him—no action. He smiled at the lines of boredom on Hemmy's brow as the younger man stared gloomily into the teleview screen.

And then the smile left his lips. The radio operator, in a cubby adjoining the control room, had spoken into the communication tube:

"Urgent call for you, sir! From Captain Knapp!"

WELLS reached out and clipped a pair of extension phones over his ears. The deep voice of Robert Knapp, captain of the mother-ship *Falcon*, came ringing in. It was strained with an excitement unusual to him.

"Wells? Knapp speaking. Something damned funny's just happened near here. You know the fishing fleet that was near us yesterday morning?"

"Yes?"

"Well, the whole thing's gone down! Destroyed, absolutely! The sea's been like glass, the weather perfect—yet from the wreckage, what there is of it, you'd think a typhoon had struck! I can't begin to explain it. No survivors, either, so far, though we're hunting for them."

"You say the boats are completely destroyed?"

"Smashed like driftwood. I tell you it's preposterous—and yet it's the fact. I think you'd better return at once, old man; you're only half an hour off. And come on the surface; it's getting light now, and you might pick up something. God knows what this means, Keith, but it's up to us to find out. It's—it's got me. . ."

His tones were oddly disturbed—almost scared—and this from a man who didn't know what fear was.

"But Bob," Keith asked, "how did you—"

"Stand by a minute! The lookout reports survivors!"

WELLS turned to meet Bowman's inquisitive face. He quickly repeated the gist of Knapp's weird story. "We saw them at dusk, last evening—remember? And now they're gone, destroyed. What can have done it?"

For some minutes the two surprised men speculated on the strange occurrence. Then Knapp's voice again rang in the headphones.

"Wells? My God, man, this is getting downright fantastic! We've just taken two survivors on board; one's barely alive and the other crazy. I can't get an intelligible thing from him; he keeps shrieking about writhing arms and awful eyes—and monsters he calls 'machine-fish'!"

"You're sure he's insane?"

Robert Knapp's voice hesitated queerly.

"Well, he's shrieking about 'machine-fish'—fish with machines over them! . . I—I'm going to broadcast the whole story to the land stations. "Machine-fish'! I don't know . I don't know. . You'd better hurry back, Wells!"

He rang off.

KEITH slipped off the headphones and told Bowman what he had learned. Hardy, staunchly built craft, those fishing boats were; born in the teeth of gales. What horror could have ripped them—all of them—to drift-

wood, with the weather perfect? And a half-mad survivor, raving about "machine-fish"!

"Such things are preposterous," Bowman commented scornfully.

"But—the fleet's gone, Hemmy," Keith replied. "Anyway, we'll speed back, and see what it's all about."

He punched swift commands on the control studs. "Empty Tanks, Zoom to Surface, Full Speed," the crimson words glared down below, and the *NX-1* at once shoved her snout up, trembling as her great electric motors began their pulsing whine. The delicate fingers of the massed dials before Keith danced exultantly. The depth-levels tolled out:

"Seven thousand . . . six thousand . . . five thousand—"

"Keith! Look there!"

Hemmy Bowman was pointing with amazement at the location chart, a black mesh screen that showed the position of other submarines within a radius of two miles. In one corner, a spot of vivid red was shining.

"But it can't be a submarine!" Wells objected. "Our reports would have mentioned it!"

The two officers stared at each other.

"'Machine-fish!'" Bowman whispered softly. "If there *were* machines, the metal would register on the chart."

"It must be them!" the commander roared, coming out of his daze. "And, by God, we're going after them!"

RAPIDLY he brought the *NX-1* out of her zoom to the surface, and left her at four thousand feet, in perfect trim, while he read the instruments closely.

A green spot in the center of the location chart denoted the *NX-1's* exact position. A distance of perhaps forty inches separated it from the red light on the meshed screen—which represented, roughly, a mile and a half. Below the chart was a thick dial, over which a black hand, indicating the mysterious submersible's approximate depth, was slowly moving.

"He's sinking—whatever he is," Keith muttered to Hemmy. "Hey, Sparks! Get me Captain Knapp."

A moment later the connection was put through.

"Bob? This is Wells again. Bob, our location chart shows the presence of some strange undersea metallic body. It can't be a submarine, for my maritime reports would show its presence. We think it has some connection with the 'machine-fish' that survivor raved about. At any rate, I'm going after it. The world has a right to know what destroyed that fishing fleet, and since the *NX-1* is right on the spot it's my duty to track it down. Rebroadcast this news to land stations, will you? I'll keep in touch with you."

Knapp's voice came soberly back. "I guess you're right, Keith; it's up to you. . . . So long, old man. Good luck!"

IN Well's veins throbbed the lust for action. With control studs at hand, location chart and teleview screen before his eyes and fifteen men waiting below for his commands, he had no fear of any monster the underseas might spew up. He glanced swiftly at the location chart and depth indicator again.

The mysterious red spot was slowly coming across the *NX-1's* bows at a distance of about one mile. Keith punched a stud, and, as his craft filled her tank and slipped down further into deep water, he spoke to Hemmy Bowman.

"Take control for a minute. Keep on all speed, and follow 'em like a bloodhound. I'm going below."

He strode down the connecting ramp to the lower deck, where he found fifteen men standing vigilantly at posts. At once Keith plunged into a full explanation of what he had learned up in the control room. He concluded:

"A great moral burden rests on us—every one of us—as we will soon come face to face with a possible world menace. Anything may happen. A state of war exists on this submarine. You will be prepared for any wartime eventuality!"

Sobered faces greeted this announcement, and perceptibly the men straightened and held themselves more alertly. Wells at once returned to the control room. A glance at the location chart and its two tiny lights told him that the intervening distance had been decreased to about half a mile.

The depth dial showed them both to be two miles below, and steadily diving lower. Charts showed the sea-floor to be three miles deep in this position, and that meant—

"Look there!" exclaimed the first officer suddenly. "It's changing course!"

THE crimson stud had suddenly shifted its course, and now was fleeing directly before them. For a moment the distance between the green and red lights remained constant—and then Keith Wells stared unbelievingly at the chart, wiped a hand across his eyes and stared again.

"Why—why, the devils are as fast as we!" he exclaimed in amazement. "I think they're even gaining on us!"

"And there's no other submarine in the world that can do more than thirty under water!" Hemmy Bowman added. "We're hitting a full forty-one!"

A call came through the communication tube from Sparks. "Report from Consolidated Radio News-Broadcasters, sir, aimed especially at us."

"Well?" asked Keith, motioning Hemmy to listen in. Sparks read it.

"'A week ago Atlantic City reported that seven men were snatched off fishing boat by unidentified tentacled monsters. Testimony of witnesses was discredited, but was later corroborated by the almost identical testimony of other witnesses at Brighton Beach, England, who saw man and woman taken by mysterious monsters whilst bathing. Perhaps these same creatures destroyed the Newfoundland fishing fleet." His level voice ceased.

"Tentacled monsters . . 'machine-fish,'" Wells murmured slowly. "'Machine-fish.' ."

Their eyes met, the same wonder in each. "Well," Keith rapped at last, "we're seeing this through!"

HE turned again to the location chart. The green spot as always was in the center, and at a constant distance was the red, showing that the *NX-1* was hot on the other's trail. The depth dials indicated that both were diving deeper every moment.

"Where in hell's it going?" the commander rasped. "We'll be on the floor in a few minutes!"

Here the teleview showed the world to be one of fantasy, one to which the sun did not exist. It was not an utter, pitchy blackness that pervaded the water, but rather a peculiar, dark blueness. No fish schools, Keith noted, scurried from them. They had already left these waters; aware, perhaps, of the passing Terror. . . .

They plunged lower yet. Wells was conscious of Hemmy Bowman's quick, uneven breathing. Conscious of the tautness of his own nerves, strung like quivering violin strings. Conscious of the terrific walls of water pressing in on them. And conscious of the men below, their lives bound implicitly in his will and brain. . . .

A thought came to him, and quickly he reached into a rack for the chart of the local sea-floor. His brow creased with puzzlement as he studied it.

"Here's more mystery, Hemmy," he muttered. "Look—there's an underwater cliff about half a mile dead ahead. It rises to within four thousand feet of the surface. And that thing out there is charging straight into its base!"

"They must be aware of it," jerked the other. "See?—they've stopped!"

IT was true. The gulf between the two colored spots was rapidly being swallowed up. At a pulsing forty-one knots the *NX-1* was closing in on the motionless mystery craft.

"They're sinking to the floor itself," observed Wells. "Perhaps waiting to attack."

The invisible beams from their ultra-violet light-beacons streamed through the silent gloom outside, yet still the teleview screen was empty. Keith punched a stud, and the *NX-1's* whining motors dulled to a scarcely audible purr.

"What is the thing?" muttered Hemmy Bowman. "God, Keith, what *is* it?"

For answer, the commander dropped them the last five hundred feet. The sea-floor rose like a gray ghost. More control studs were pushed; the order-board below read: "All Power Off, Rest in Trim." The location chart told a tale that wrung a gasp from Bowman's throat. The red and green lights were practically touching. . . .

The hands of Petty Officer Brown, the helmsman, were quivering on the helm. Wells' fists kept tensing and relaxing as he peered for a sight of the enemy in the teleview. Nothing showed but the moving fingers of spectral kelp. Then both he and Bowman cried out as one:

"There!"

CHAPTER II

The Silent Ray

A STRANGE shape had suddenly materialized on the screen—an immense, oval-shaped thing of dull metal, wtih great curving cuts of glass-like substance in its blunt bow, like staring eyes; a lifeless, staring thing, stretching far into the curtain of gloom behind. How long it was, Keith could not tell; at first his numb brain refused to grasp it and reduce it to definite, sane standards of size and length. The cold weeds of the sea-floor kelp beds swayed eerily over and around it. From its bow, he saw, peculiar knobs jutted, the function of which he guessed with dread.

Was it waiting with a purpose? Was it waiting—and inviting attack?

A frightened whisper from Hemmy Bowman broke the hush:

"Keith, the thing has ports, but shows no lights! What kind of creatures can they be?"

As he spoke, the three men in the control room felt the unmistakable, jarring tingle of an electric shock. And while their nerves still jumped, it came again; and again. They were conscious of a slight feeling of drowsiness.

Keith gaped at Bowman and Brown, and then a flash on the teleview screen drew his eyes. There, against the blackness of its otherwise inanimate hulk, one of the jutting knobs on the bow of the mysterious submarine was glowing and pulsing with orange life! With it came the tingling shock again. It flicked off as they watched, then returned and went once more.

"They're attacking, but thank God the shock was harmless!" Wells said grimly. "All right; they're asked for it: I'm going to see how they like the taste of a torpedo!"

THE two submarines were resting on the ocean floor with perhaps two hundred feet between them. The *NX-1's* bow tubes were not exactly in line to score a direct hit; she would have to be maneuvered slightly to port. The range was short; the explosion from the torpedoes would be titanic.

Keith punched the control studs, ordering the men below to assume firing stations. Then, while waiting for the *NX-1* to shift, he studied the teleview screen to sight the range exactly. The black dot which represented the enemy craft was not directly on the crossed hair-lines of the dial-like range-finder, but shifting the *NX-1* a few feet would bring it to the perfect firing point.

But the *NX-1* did not budge.

Surprised, her commander swung and looked at Bowman. "What the devil?" he cried. "Did that shock—?" He left the dread thought unfinished and leaped to the speaking tubes.

"Craig! Jones! Wetherby!" he yelled. "Men! Don't you hear me? Aren't you—"

He broke off, wordless, waiting for an answer that did not come, then

sprang to the connecting ramp and ran to the deck below.

The scene he found halted him abruptly in his tracks. Every member of the crew was sprawled on the deck, in grotesque, limp postures. They had been standing rigidly at posts, he saw, when the thing, whatever it was, had struck. Without a sound, without a single cry of alarm, the *NX-1's* crew had been laid low!

THE commander slowly advanced to the deck and stared more closely at the upturned faces around him. He saw that every man's eyes were open.

Bending over one still form, he pressed his hand on the heart. It was beating! The man was alive! Amazed, he moved to another and another: they were all breathing, slowly and regularly—were all alive! A curious look in their eyes staggered him for a moment. He could swear that they recognized him, knew he was staring at them—for every single pair was alight with intelligence, and Keith fancied he saw gleams of recognition.

"It must have been a paralyzing ray!" he gasped. "A thing our scientists 've been trying to develop for years. . And that monster outside knows the secret. . ." He lifted an arm of the inert figure at his feet; when he released the grip, it flopped limply back to the deck again.

"Keith! Come back, quick!"

Startled, the commander turned to find Hemingway Bowman at the top of the connecting ramp, his face distorted with alarm.

"For God's sake, come back quick!" he yelled again. "Down there the ray might get you!"

With the words, Wells leaped to the ramp and raced to the control room. He had no sooner made it than he felt again the queer tingle of the electric charge. He found himself trembling. Bowman's face was white. His words came stuttering.

"One second later and they'd have got you. . . They got Sparks in his cubby. . . . You see, the ray doesn't affect us in the control room because—"

"Because the Gibson insulation that protects the instruments keeps it out!" Keith finished grimly. "I see!"

Just then a slight jar ran through the submarine. Coincident with it came a cry from Brown, the helmsman. His arm was pointed at the teleview.

There they saw the enemy's mighty dirigible of metal was now within thirty feet of the *NX-1*. It had crept up silently, without warning. And, spanning the short gulf between them, an arm of webbed metal craned from the other's huge bow, hooking tightly into the American submarine's forward hawser holes!

As they took this in, the enemy ship moved away and the arm of metal tightened. The *NX-1* shuddered. And, at first slowly, but with ever increasing speed, she got under way and slid after her captor. They were being towed away. Kidnaped! Men, submarine and all!

KEITH WELLS mopped sweat from a hot brow and rapidly reviewed his weapons. He was sorely restricted. Through an emergency system the *NX-1* could be propelled and maneuvered from her control room; but the torpedo tubes needed local attendance.

"Hemmy, reverse engines," he jerked, himself spinning over a small wheel. "Let's see if we can out-pull the devil!"

At once they felt the shock of the paralyzing ray, and then the surging whine of the Edsel electrics pulsed up and in the teleview screen they watched the grim struggle of ship against ship.

Imperceptibly, almost, as her screws cut in and churned, the forward progress of the *NX-1* was slowing, the speed of the other being cut down, until finally they but barely forged ahead. Slowly, ever so slowly they were out-pulled; inch by inch they were dragged ahead. Their motors could not hold even.

"She's more powerful than we!" Wells' bitter voice spoke. "Damn!" He thought desperately, while Bowman and Brown stared at the fantastic tale the teleview spelled out.

Again the paralyzing shock tingled, an intangible jailer that bound them, more surely than steel bars, to the control room. To dare that streaming barrage meant instant impotence, and perhaps, later, death. .

"Our two bow torpedoes," Keith mused slowly. "We're a bit close, but it's our only chance. The ray comes at intervals of about a minute; the torps are ready for firing. If one of us could dash forward and discharge 'em. Brown, that's you!"

The petty officer met his commander's gaze levelly. He smiled. "Yes, sir, I'm ready!" he said.

"Good! It'll have to be quick work, though; I'll try and keep the sub pointed straight. Wait for the ray, then run like hell!"

THE first officer took over the helm and Brown stepped to the forward ladder, waiting for the periodic ray to be discharged.

The odd tingle came and vanished. "Now!" Wells roared, and Brown leaped down the thin steel rungs.

He staggered at the bottom from the force of his impact, then straightened and raced madly forward. Through the drone of the motors the two officers could hear the staccato beat of his feet.

But their eyes were glued to the teleview. Through clutching beds of seaweed the enemy submarine was ploughing. Her great, smooth bow lay straight ahead, metal hawser arm spanning the thirty feet between them. In another second, Keith thought grimly, two dytramite packed tubes of sudden death would thunderbolt into that hull, and—

Brown pulled the lever.

The tubes spat out compressed air; a scream ran through the submarine; and the two steel fish leaped from their sheaths, their tiny props roaring. Over the narrow gulf they shot; the range was short, their target dead ahead—and yet by bare inches they missed!

No answering roar bellowed back. Keith had watched their course; had seen them flash by the enemy's bow, flicking it with their rudders, but nothing more. "Why?" he cried. And, as Bowman moved his hands in a hopeless gesture, he saw in the teleview the reason.

It was a jagged pinnacle of rock, which, just before Brown had fired, had been straight ahead. The towing monster had seen it and veered sharply to avoid crashing. The barest change of course, yet sufficient to avoid the torpedoes.

WELLS and Bowman were cursing savagely when the sound of Brown, racing desperately aft, jerked the commander to the ladder. He saw the petty officer at its foot. "Hurry!" Wells shouted. "The ray!"

Brown grasped the steel rungs and scrambled upward, but he was too late. The fatal charge tingled. A peculiar, surprised expression washed over his face; his hands loosened their grip. For a second his eyes looked questioningly at his commander; a faint sigh escaped him; and then his arms flung out, his body relaxed, and he slumped like a slab of meat to the deck below. . . .

Keith Wells saw red. Blind to everything, he was just about to charge down the ladder to himself re-load the forward tubes when the grip of Hemmy Bowman's hand stayed him. The thing Hemmy was staring at in the teleview screen sobered him completely.

The wall of rock to which the enemy submarine had first been charging had become visible, soaring vastly from the gloom of the sea-floor. And the monster was towing them straight into a dark, jagged cleft at its base.

"It's a cavern!" Keith breathed. "A split in the rock—the lair of that devil. And we're being dragged into it!"

CHAPTER III

Sacrifice

AT that moment Keith Wells knew fear. Each second they were being hauled closer to the monster's dim lair. It lay there, dark, mysterious, fingered by gently swaying, clammy kelp. A hushed solitude seemed to reign over it, aweing all undersea life from the vicinity. . . . Wells turned his head to meet Bowman's eyes, and read in them a silent question.

What now?

He groaned in the agony of his mind. In a few minutes, all would be over. Once the *NX-1* was dragged into that dark cavern there'd be no chance of escaping to warn the world above, of saving the submarine. What now? The question brought beads of sweat to his tormented brow. He, Keith Wells, standing impotently by while his ship, the pride of the service, was hauled inch by inch to some strange doom!

Racked by these thoughts, he murmured tortured, jerky phrases, unconscious he was giving voice to the things that flogged his brain.

"What can I do? I've got to save my ship—I've got to get back to break the news—I've got to tell the world! But how? How—" His expression changed suddenly. "That's it! That hawser arm between us must be broken!"

"Yes."

First Officer Hemingway Bowman's clear voice broke in on the older man's thoughts with that one crisp word. Keith swung, to find the other's eyes fixed levelly on his.

"You're right, Keith. The hawser arm must be broken; with a depth charge, of course. It's the only way.

"To attach a depth charge," he continued evenly, "a man must leave the ship. You can't, Keith. It will be me."

THE commander did not speak.

"I'll put on a sea-suit," Hemmy went on quickly, eyes lighting. "You tip the submarine and I'll slide out the conning tower exit port on the lee side, so they can't see me, and worm forward through the kelp. We're almost holding them even; that'll be easy. I'll be protected from the paralyzing shock until the last second, and it may not get me outside; that'll have to be chanced. The hawser arm's only some ten feet above the sea-floor; I can reach it with a hook on the charge." He paused.

"I'll attach it; and when it bursts I'll try to get back and grab that ring on the midships exit port, and you can let me in when we get to the surface. But if I take too long, Keith—if I miss—you beat it without me. You understand? Beat it!"

He gazed straight at his friend. "Understand, Keith?"

Commander Keith Wells bowed his head in acquiescence. He was afraid that if he met Hemmy Bowman's steady eyes he'd make a fool of himself.

Hemmy glanced at the screen once more, shivering as he saw how near the black cavern was. Then he moved rapidly, playing the cards carefully for his gamble with death. He had to: the trumps were in the other hand.

From the locker where their sea-suits were stowed he grabbed his own, and with quick fingers ripped the slides and fitted it on. A sheath of yellow Lestofabrik, its weighted feet and gleaming casque transformed his slim figure into a giant such as might stalk through a nightmare. Built cunningly into the helmet was a tiny radio transmitter and receiver, with a range of a quarter-mile; hugging to the shoulders inside nestled the air-making mechanism, its tiny generators already in motion. Around the helmet was fastened a small removable undersea-light. The wrists of the suit were very flexible, permitting the freest motion.

Once in the suit, Hemmy smiled through the still-opened face-shield.

"Got the depth charge ready, Keith? Make it fast—that cavern's near! . . . Good!"

SILENTLY the commander fitted the black bomb to his friend's shoulders. It was timed to fire a minute after being set. A long wire hook craned from its top, and this hook Bowman would fasten on the hawser arm.

"Without Sparks, I guess I'll have to communicate with you through portable," Keith said, and quickly donned one of the tiny portable sets.

"Right. Ready, Keith."

Bowman started his awkward, crawling progress up the ladder into the conning tower just above, Keith helping from behind. When they stood before the exit port on the lee side, Wells shot back its bolts and the door swung open, revealing the black emptiness of the water chamber. The commander gazed for a second into Bowman's eyes. The moment had come.

Keith turned his head away, felt a hand grip his. He wrung it tightly....

Bowman clumped into the chamber.

The commander closed and locked the door, and he heard the streaming water pour in as Hemmy turned the valve. Then Wells sped down the ladder and tilted the diving and course rudders of the submarine.

She swayed daintily over to port; held there. A moment later the recurring electric tingle brushed him. Had the enemy seen Bowman leave? Had the ray struck him down?

He glared into the teleview. "Thank God!" he breathed. For Hemmy had already slid down the *NX-1's* smooth hull and was safe on the sea-floor beside her.

"Everything right?" Wells asked, speaking into the microphone of his portable.

"All O.K.," came the answer. "Going forward now. Kelp thick as hell."

KEITH'S eyes bored at the screen. This misshapen monster who was his friend! Almost obscured by bands of thick-leaved kelp the yellow form moved, hands clearing a pathway through the weeds. Slowly but surely he made for the bow of the submersible.

"Hard going, Keith. God—the cavern's right ahead!"

It was ghostly to hear Hemmy's warm voice from the lifeless solitude outside. Breath coming quickly, Wells watched the silent scene—the cleft in the wall of rock overshadowing everything now. The diver fought ahead, gaining inch by inch.

Now, save for occasional clumps of weed, he was exposed to the enemy.... Now the last desperate gauntlet was reached. . Keith felt his blood pound hotly.

"I'm gaining, Keith. Gaining. . . ."

Bowman had little breath for speech. His tiny form battled on, now sinking from sight as he dropped into some masked gully, now wrestling slowly with great swaying strands of kelp, but always struggling ahead.

"I'm at the bow, Keith! The hawser arm's right in our mooring holes. I'll go halfway before fastening the charge. Any signs of life from the devil?"

"None yet, Hemmy. But go slow. Hide all you can, old man, for God's sake! . ."

Right beneath the metal arm, Bowman's dwarfed figure crept doggedly ahead. Forward, inch by breathless inch. Kelp thickened, washed away; the two hulking submersibles, captor and captive, surged onward—but just a little faster went the valiant figure with the black charge on its back.

The towing monster had its snout in the cavern. The darkness thickened. Bowman was quarter way!

He plunged desperately. Half way!

"I'm there, Keith! Now for it!"

"Oh, God!" Wells cried. "They see you; they're coming!"

For he had seen strange shapes leaving the enemy submarine.

And at that same moment, Bowman saw them, too.

THEY came like the blink of a dark eye from a door that had quickly slid open in the mysterious ship's bow. As tall as a man they were, and there

were two of them, though at first the nature of their bodies merged with the wreathing kelp made them seem like a dozen. Bowman stared at them, hypnotized with fear. His legs and arms went dead, and his whole gallant spirit seemed to slump into lifeless clay. Now he knew why the fishermen had shrieked "machine-fish." Each one of them had eight tapering arms, eight restless tentacles. These were octopi, most hideous scavengers of the ocean floor! And not only octopi—but octopi sheathed in metal-scaled armor!

As they came closer, he realized this preposterous fact. The dark substance of their writhing tentacles was not flesh: it was a coat of metal scales. And the fat central mass which held their eyes and vital organs and beaked jaw—this mass was completely enveloped by a globe of glass. From inside, he could see great eyes staring at him. The monsters came towards him quite slowly, obviously wary, advancing over the sea-floor in what was a hideous mockery of walking, their forward tentacles outstretched.

With a sob, Hemmy Bowman pulled himself from his trance. He glanced back at the *NX-1*. He still had time to retreat. He might be able to get back inside before these monsters seized him.

But that meant abandoning his job. And already his own submarine was nosing into the cavern. The choice between the octopi and retreat stared him in the face. He pulled himself together and jerked his arms back to action.

EYES bulging, Keith Wells peered at the dim teleview screen. He saw the creatures approaching Hemmy. And then, suddenly, he remembered his radiophone.

"Hemmy! Come back, for God's sake!" he cried. "Come back while you can—it's hopeless!"

But Bowman had already seized the depth charge from his back and hooked it on the hawser arm above.

Immediately, with that action, all caution fled from the approaching monsters. Their tentacles whipped furiously; and in a great arc they sprang for the tiny figure of the diver.

With a deep breath, Hemmy staggered forward to meet them. "Keith!" he gasped, "I'll try to hold 'em away from the charge! When it bursts, zoom! Zoom like hell to the surface!" And then the tentacles had him.

Keith watched, cursing his impotence to help. Hemmy had no weapon; he was trying to hold them back by the weight of his body; he reached out and grasped a tentacle and hugged it to him, shoving forward with all his puny strength. But all his effort was as nothing. One of the octopi writhed past him and darted onto the depth charge. Its tentacles tugged at the bomb; pulled furiously.

The time charge exploded. The *NX-1* rocked like a quivering reed; Wells was knocked violently to the floor; a vast roar smote his ear-drums. When he staggered to his feet he found that the octopus that was pulling at the charge had disappeared—blown into fragments of flesh and metal. But the hawser arm was broken! The *NX-1*, free, shot back a full fifty feet under the pull of her reversed screws. A cry echoed in her commander's ears:

"Go back, Keith! Go like hell!"

He saw the remaining octopus lift Bowman and whip to the exit port of its submarine. The lid slid into place, closing on the monster and his friend; and the enemy ship vanished into the black cavern.

ONCE clear of the opening, Keith set his motors full forward and brought the diving rudders up. Quickly the ship sped from the haunted sea-floor to the sun-warmed surface. A last thin call rang in his radiophone:

"They've got me inside, Keith. It's dark, and filled with water. I can't see anything, but I—I guess we're going through the cavern. . . . Forget about me, old boy. So long! So—"

The voice was abruptly cut off.

Keith ripped the instrument from his head. Then, face white and drawn, he ran to the radio cubby. Standing over Sparks' inert body, he put through a call to Robert Knapp, on the *Falcon*.

"Knapp?" he said harshly. "This is Wells. I'll be with you in a few minutes. Yes—yes—I'll tell you the whole story later. But get this now: Have the day shift all ready to take over the submarine by the time I pull alongside."

He said no more just then, but rang off, and, looking back, he muttered savagely:

"But I'll be back, Hemmy—I'll be back!"

CHAPTER IV

In the Cavern

"THAT'S the story, Knapp. They got Bowman, and I had to run away. Their ship disappeared into the cavern. I've got a hunch, though, that it's not just a cavern, but a tunnel, leading through to some underwater world. That series of subsea earthquakes probably opened it up; and now these devil-octopi are free to pour out. I've *got* to find out what's what, and that's why I'm going down again as soon as the torpedo system's ready!"

Keith and Robert Knapp were in the *Falcon's* chart room. On the table before them lay a broad white map with a cross-mark indicating the position of the mysterious dark cavern.

Wells was striding up and down like a caged tiger in his impatience to be off. Every other minute he glared down to where the *NX-1* lay alongside. On her conning tower stood the tall blond-haired figure of Graham, the first officer of the day shift, supervising the final details of the work of installing a system of jury controls whereby the submarine's torpedoes could be fired from her control room.

Keith stopped short and faced Knapp. "It won't be so one-sided this time, Bob," he promised. "You see: when the location chart shows the enemy ship, I'll rush all men into the control room, where the paralyzing ray can't harm them. I don't know but what they have other weapons, but I'm gambling on getting my torps in first. They've killed Bowman; they've ravaged a whole fishing fleet; they're free to emerge from their hole and maraud every ocean on the globe! They've got to be stopped! And since I'm armed and have the only submarine on the spot, I've got to do it! I know how to fight them now!"

CAPTAIN ROBERT KNAPP'S sense of things was badly disordered. He had just heard a story which his common sense told him couldn't be true, but which the evidence of his eyes had grimly authenticated. He had seen fifteen men slung aboard his ship from the *NX-1's* silent hull; men stretched in grotesque, limp attitudes; men struck down by a paralyzing ray. Why, no nation on earth had developed rays for warfare! Yet—a crew of helpless men was even then in the sick bay, receiving attention in the hope that they might recover.

"You're going right through that cavern, then, Wells?" he asked incredulously. "You're going to investigate what lies beyond?"

"Nothing else! And I won't come out till I've blown that octopi ship to pieces!"

"It sounds preposterous," Knapp murmured, shaking his head. "Octopi, you say—and clad in metal suits! Running a submarine more powerful than the *NX-1!* Armed with a ray—a paralyzing ray! I can't believe—I can't conceive—"

"You've seen the men! . . . Knapp, if I were you I'd swing my eight-inchers out, bring up the plane catapult and keep the deck torpedo tubes loaded and ready. It's best to be prepared; God knows what's going on underseas these days!"

First Officer Graham appeared at the

door. "Work finished, sir," he said. "Ready to cast off."

"Thank heaven!" Wells muttered, and stretched out his hand to Robert Knapp. "Broadcast what I've told you, Bob, and say that the *NX-1* won't be back till everything's under control. I'll keep in touch with you. So long!" And he was gone before the captain could even wish him good luck.

ORDERS raced from her commander's fingers on the stud board in the control room. "Crash Dive" filled her tanks and put her nose perilously down, so that in thirty seconds only a swirling patch of water was left to show where once she'd lain. A brief command to the helmsman and she pointed straight for the dark cavern marked on the chart.

When well under way, Keith descended with Graham to inspect the new torpedo firing system, and found it in good working order. "Graham," he ordered tersely, "instruct the crew fully about rushing to the control room on one ring of the general alarm. And send the cook up to me in a minute or so. I'll be in Sparks' cubby."

Above again, he instructed the radio man to rig a remote control sender and receiver in the insulated control room. The need for centering the whole crew there during engagements would crowd the room awkwardly, but at other times, while proceeding on their inspection of the cavern lair, they could remain at their regular posts.

That, at least, was Wells' plan.

He looked up and found the cook, McKegnie, grinning at him from the door of the control room. Keith smiled, running his eyes over the portly magnificence of his gently perspiring figure. "Keg," he said cheerfully, "I want you to move your hot plate and culinary apparatus up here; you see, we're all likely to be crowded in here for some time, and your coffee's going to be an absolute necessity." He couldn't resist a crack at McKegnie's well-known and passionate curiosity as to what made the thigmajigs of the control board work: "And besides, it'll give you a chance to observe the instruments and perfect yourself for your future career as a naval officer. Much better than a correspondence course in 'How to Be a Submarine Commander,' eh?"

Cook McKegnie grinned sheepishly, and left. He was well used to such jests, but he never would admit that his extraordinary interest in watching the ship's wheels go round was accompanied by a miraculous inability to comprehend *why* they went round. . . .

FIFTEEN minutes later the helmsman's cry, "Cavern showing, sir!" swung the commander to the teleview screen. The dark, kelp-shrouded opening he knew so well was already looming on it. And he was prepared.

"Enter," he said, while his punched studs ordered, "Quarter Speed, Ready at Posts, Tanks in Trim." The *NX-1* slackened her gait, balanced cautiously, and struck a straight, even course as she crept closer to the cleft entrance through which, some two hours earlier, the octopi ship had nosed.

Screws turning slowly, she edged through the jagged cavern. Shades of inky blackness grew on the teleview and danced in fantastic blotches; the screen turned to a welter of black, threatening shadows; became a useless maze of ever-changing forms. Keith mouthed curses as he stared at it; he now had nothing by which to judge his progress, to maneuver the submarine, save directional instruments and, perhaps, chance scrapings of the tunnel's ragged walls against the outer hull. The *NX-1* was running a gauntlet of immeasurable danger, her only assurance of success being the fact that a larger craft had preceded her.

But how far, Keith wondered, had that ship preceded her? How was he to know that it had gone straight through? There might be a dozen different turnings in this tunnel: the submarine could easliy tilt head-on against

a jagged rock and puncture her hull. There might be mines planted directly in their course; he might be swimming straight into some hideous ambuscade.

He drove these thoughts from his mind. The passage had to be made on the fickle authority of the senses; and, realizing this, Wells took the helm into his own hands. Graham was posted at the location chart, with instructions to report the red light if it showed.

DOWN below, the Edsel electrics were humming very softly; the men stood vigilantly at posts. On their brows were little beads of sweat, and here and there a hand clenched nervously. All knew they were in a tight place; otherwise they were ignorant of where their commander was leading them. Occasionally a long, shivering rasp ran through the ship as her hull nudged the rough tunnel wall. Then the course rudders would swing gently over; and perhaps, almost immediately, another grinding cry of rock and steel would come from the other side. Then would come quickly indrawn breaths as the rudders swung again and the humming silence droned on.

The scrapings came quite often. Often, too, the motors would go silent altogether, and the *NX-1* would rest almost motionless as her commander felt for an opening. It was a tense, nerve-wringing ordeal. The silence, the waiting, the dainty scrapings were maddening.

Keith Wells' skin was prickling. He kept only fingertips on the tiny helm: he was playing that uncanny sixth sense of the submarine commander. When it mislead him, the rasping rock groaned out, scarring the submarine's smooth skin. Generally, the tunnel was straight; but each time he heard his ship rub against some exterior obstruction, his teeth went tight—for who knew but what it might be a mine?

They had penetrated perhaps a half-mile when Graham, eyes steady on the teleview, reported: "Light growing, sir!"

WELLS saw that the screen was filling with a soft, faintly glowing bluish color. The walls of the tunnel became visible, and he noted that they were widening out, funnel-like. He dared to increase speed slightly. Three minutes later he saw that the blue illumination was seeping from the end of the tunnel. They continued out.

"Thank God, we're through!" he muttered to Graham. "You see, I was right! It's an underground sea—and we're at the top of it." For the instruments indicated a depth beneath them of roughly three miles. They were in, evidently, a large cavern, of vast length and depth.

The *NX-1* continued slowly forward, two pair of eyes intent on her teleview screen. Keith jotted down the tunnel's position, and the funnel-shaped hole sank away behind their slow screws. And then, upon the location chart, a faint red dot suddenly glowed!

It was upon them in a flash. A small tube of metal, shaped somewhat in the form of the big octopi submarine, had darted up from below, hovered a second close to them, and then, almost before they realized they were being surveyed, sped back into the mysterious depths from which it had come.

"A lookout, I suppose," Keith muttered, breathing more easily. "Couldn't have held more than two of those creatures. . . Well, the alarm's out, I guess, Graham, but it can't be helped. Let's see what it's like down below."

THEY plunged steadily down, then ahead. And presently there grew on the teleview vague forms which widened their eyes and made their breath come quicker. Keith had guessed the tunnel led to a civilization of some kind, but he was not prepared for the sight that loomed hazily through the soft blue water.

Strange, moundlike shapes appeared far below, mounds grouped in orderly rows and clusters, with streets running between them, thronged with tiny, spidery dots. Octopi! It was, the

commander realized, a city of the monsters—a complete city like those of surface peoples! For several miles in every direction the water-city spread out, farther than the teleview could pierce. Wells marveled at this separately developed civilization, this deep-buried realm of octopi whose unexpected intellectual powers had permitted such development. Perhaps, he pondered, this city was only one of many; perhaps only a village. He could but vaguely glimpse the queer mound buildings, but saw that they were of varying height and were filled with dark round entrance holes, through which the creatures streamed on their different errands. . .

He saw no schools of fish around. "I guess they've been all killed off, or eaten," he commented to the wonder-struck Graham. "Probably the octopi have separate hatcheries where they raise them for food."

"But—good Lord!" the first officer exclaimed. "A city—a city like ours! Down here, filled with octopi! . ."

"Yes," answered Wells grimly, "and this 'city' may only be a small settlement; there may be scores of these places. We'd better continue ahead now that we're here; for we've got to get all the information we can. I only hope these monsters haven't more than one big submarine. We can expect an attack any minute. . ."

THE *NX-1* pressed on. The city dropped behind. A breathless tenseness had settled down over the submarine; she was proceeding with utmost caution, her anxious officers alert at the location chart. The great fear that tormented them was that they might be attacked, not by one, but by a fleet of the octopi ships. . .

Then, at the rim of the chart, a red spot appeared! It grew rapidly, charging down on them at great speed. The spot was large; this was no small sentry boat! At once the alarm bell shrilled its warning; the crew below left their posts and raced to the control room. With sure mechanical fingers the emergency system gripped the valve handles and motor levers; Keith swung the *NX-1* onto a level keel, straightened her out, and decreased speed still more. Giving the rods of the motor and rudder controls to Graham, he moved to the small lever which would unleash his bow torpedoes, and fingered it lightly. The *NX-1* was ready for action.

Scarcely had the men reached the small control room than the familiar electric charge tingled. They stared wonderingly at each other, half afraid. No one seemed hurt. One hand on the torpedo lever, Wells watched his charts and instruments. He thanked God that there was only one of the enemy.

The ray's shock came again—and stronger. The red dot was practically upon them. The screen was still empty. Coolly, Keith slowed the submarine to a dead stop. The crimson stud came closer. . . .

AND then he saw it. It was the same fearsome, hulking form. The same curving windows, dark and lifeless. The same knobs on its bow, one now leaping and pulsing with the paralyzing glow. At a distance of a few hundred feet the octopi ship swerved to a halt, dousing the *NX-1* with its ray unceasingly. Again those two underwater craft, so oddly contrasted, were face to face. And again the weapon that had once struck the American ship's crew down at their posts was directed full onto the *NX-1*.

But it was harmless! It merely tingled, and did not paralyze! The control room sheathing held it out stoutly. The men's faces showed overwhelming relief.

Keith smiled grimly. Now, at least, he had the devils where he wanted them; now it was his turn to strike with a—to them—terrible, mysterious weapon. They had attacked; had failed—and now he could square up for Hemmy and send a pair of torpedoes into that ship of hideous tentacles.

"Port five!" The ship swerved slightly. "Hold even!" The enemy craft was very close. The *NX-1's* bow tubes were sighted in direct line. Her torpedoes could not possibly miss. This time, destruction for the octopi ship was inevitable. . .

Keith Wells gripped the lever that held the torps in leash.

"Wait!"

Sparks, a bare foot from him, yelled out the word. Wells, alarmed, released his grip on the knob. The radio operator was listening intently, a circle of taut faces around his crouched back. He swung excitedly around.

"For God's sake, don't fire!" he cried. "Hemingway Bowman's on that submarine! He's alive—and calling for you!"

CHAPTER V

The Other Weapon

BOWMAN—alive!

Keith Wells let go the torpedo lever. His whole orderly plan of action was crashed in a second. For an instant he stood gaping at the radio man, forgetful of the peril outside, striving desperately to hit on some way of surmounting this unlooked-for obstacle. The idea of firing on his friend—killing Hemmy Bowman with his own hand—paralyzed his brain.

And in that unguarded instant the octopi struck.

From the bow of the enemy submarine, slanting from another of its peculiar knobs, a narrow beam of violet light poured, cutting a vivid swathe across the teleview. The huddled men stared at it, not comprehending what it was. They felt no shock of electricity, nor could they discern any other harmful effect. The ray held steadily on their bow, not varying in the slightest, for a full thirty seconds. And still none of them could feel or see any damage.

Wells, however, gradually became aware that he was bathed in perspiration, that great streams of sweat were coursing down his face. A quick glance told him that every member of the crew was the same way; and then, suddenly, he was conscious of a wave of intense heat—heat which quickly became terrific. The control room was stifling!

Before he could act, the *NX-1* slipped sharply to one side. A sharp hissing sound grew at her bow, climbing steadily to a shriek. Long streamers of white steam crept along the lower deck and seeped up into the control room. And then rose the fatal sound of rushing water—water pouring into the submarine from outside!

For the violet beam was a heat ray—a weapon surface civilizations had not yet developed. While the *NX-1's* crew had stared at it in the teleview, it had melted a hole in their bow.

Immediately the submarine lost trim, and the deck tilted ominously. In the face of material danger—danger from a source he understood—the commander became cool and methodical.

"Sea-suits on!" he snapped. "Then forward and break out steel collision-mat and weld it in place! Every man! You, too, Sparks and McKegnie!"

"But—but, sir!" stammered Graham. "Do you want them to get us with their paralyzing ray?"

"You'd rather drown?" Wells flung back. Silenced, the first officer donned his sea-suit, and in thirty seconds the rest of the crew had theirs on and were cluttering clumsily forward.

ALONE in the control room, Keith battled with the unbalancing flow of water, maneuvering with all his skill in a futile attempt to keep the *NX-1* on even keel. The men forward worked with great speed, spurred on by the realization that they were fighting death itself, but even as they labored the submarine swung in ever increasing rolls and dips; the great weight of water she had shipped slopped back and forth; her bow went steadily down. Keith swept her forward tanks clean of water, always conscious of the immobile, staring octopi submarine in the

teleview, watching them, it seemed, curiously, and not driving home their advantage with additional bolts of the violet heat ray.

Despite her commander's frantic efforts, the *NX-1* fluttered down remorselessly; the cavern floor rose, and, sinking with them, came the octopi craft, in slow mockery of a fighting plane pursuing its stricken foe to the very ground. . . .

She struck bottom with a soft, thudding jar, and settled on even keel. At once Wells released the helm, jumped into his own sea-suit and stumbled down to take command.

He found the steel collision-mat in place, and the welding of it nearly completed. A few feathery trickles of water still seeped through on each side, but under his terse directions the pumps were soon draining it out. The weird figures of the crew in their sea-suits looked like creatures from another planet as they rapidly finished the job.

"All right—up to the control room, everybody! Fast!" Wells roared.

The men stumbled aft as rapidly as they could in their cumbersome suits. Several were already on the ladder. A few feet further—

But at that moment the paralyzing ray again stabbed into the ship—and Keith Wells slumped helplessly to the deck. And as he crumpled, he glimpsed the grotesque, falling figures of his men, and saw one come tumbling down the ladder from the control room, where he had almost reached safety. . . .

PECULIAR sensations, unendurable thoughts raced through the commander as he lay there limply. He knew his predicament. He wanted desperately to rise, to rush to the control room. Time and time again in those first few moments of impotence he strove mightily to pull his limbs back to life. But his greatest efforts were barren of result, save to leave him feeling still weaker. The fate that he had seen strike down Brown now enmeshed him. He was paralyzed. Helpless. In the midst of his crew.

After a moment all sensation left his body. His limbs might not have existed. Sensation, pain, lived only in his brain—and there it was terrible, because self-created.

He found himself sprawled flat on his back, his eyes directed stiffly upward. He could not move them, but out of the corners he vaguely sensed the other figures around him. Helpless, every one! And who knew if they would ever come out of the spell! Victory had gone to the octopi. .

Minutes that seemed like hours passed. And then a well-remembered voice sounded in the radio earphones in his helmet. It was Hemmy Bowman, speaking from the enemy ship.

"Keith! Keith Wells! Are you there?" the voice cried. "Keith! What have they done to you?"

And Keith, he could not answer! He could not answer that troubled voice of his friend—that voice from a friend he had thought dead.

Again Bowman spoke. "Keith! Can't you hear me? What are they doing to you? Oh—" For a moment it stopped, then came once more, thick with anguish. "Oh, God, what's happened?" Then lower: "If only there were light, so I could see what they're doing. . . ." The voice tapered into silence. Keith could picture Hemmy, probably bound, giving him up for dead. . . .

THEN, quite distinctly, he heard a clank at the *NX-1's* bow! The submarine jerked, her bow tilted up—and with increasing speed she moved forward, silently as a ghost.

Keith thought he knew what that meant. The octopi ship had grasped them with another of its hawser arms, and was pulling them away. But where to? One of those mound cities? His brain was a turmoil as he tried to imagine what was before them. But all he could do was lie there and wait.

The American craft was towed for perhaps ten minutes—ten ages to her

commander—then coasted slowly to a pause, and with a sharp jar settled into rest. As she did so, every light in her hull went suddenly out.

It had been bad enough with the lights on, but the darkness was far worse. The submarine was a tomb—as silent as one, and full of men who lived and yet were dead. Hemmy Bowman's voice came no more to Wells. He was alone with his moiling doubts and fears and unanswerable questions, and he knew that every other man there was alone with them, too.

As his eyes became partially accustomed to the darkness, he could distinguish vaguely the forms of the familiar mechanisms above him. A slight noise grew suddenly and resolved itself into a prolonged scraping along the outer hull of the submarine. At intervals it paused and gave way to a series of sharp, definite taps.

Keith realized what those sounds signified: the octopi were striving to find some entrance to the *NX-1!* This, he told himself, was the end. The creatures would break through; water would rush in, and every man would drown. For the face-shields of their sea-suits were open!

The dull scrapings ran completely around the motionless submarine, punctuated with the same staccato tappings. By the movement of the sound, Wells realized the octopi were approaching the lower starboard exit port. And as they neared that port, the noise abruptly stopped.

Then for some minutes silence fell. Next, the commander heard what was unmistakably the exit port's water chamber being filled—and a moment later emptied again. The devilish creatures had solved the puzzle of the means of entrance!

IN the awful darkness the inner door of the port swung open. A slow, slithering sound came to Wells' ears. He sensed, though he could not see, the presence of alien creatures. An odor struck his nostrils—that of fish. . . .

A deliberate something crawled directly across one outstretched arm, and another across his legs. And above him loomed a monstrous, complicated shadow, which, after a moment, slowly melted from his line of vision. Panicky, he strove again to bring his limbs back to life, but still could not. . . .

Keith knew that in the darkness which their huge unblinking eyes could penetrate they were inspecting the *NX-1's* interior, examining the men stretched on its deck, feeling them with their cold metal-scaled tentacles. Another complicated shadow crept back over the commander's line of sight, and from all around rose the slithering, shuffling tread of the octopi's many tentacles, rasping on the steel flooring.

Sweat from Wells' forehead trickled down and stung his eyes as he lay in that dark agony. There seemed to be countless investigating tentacles feeling through the entire submarine. One of them, iron-hard, suddenly coiled under his armpit and lifted him lightly as a feather from the deck. Another snaked up and clicked his face-shield securely shut. Keith heard other clicks, and knew that the shields of his men were likewise being closed.

The commander was held straight out from the octopus' revolting body, and as he swung, helpless, he could see that more men were grasped similarly in other mighty arms. Dangling in the shadow-filled darkness he was carried slowly to the exit port, and he heard the inner door swing open, then close again. Water streamed through the valves; it encompassed him with a feeling of lightness, a feeling of floating, as he swung at the end of the long metal-sheathed tentacles. A moment later a soft bluish glow burst on his vision, and he saw that he was outside. There was a long wait, and when the current next swung him around he was dismayed to see that every one of the monstrous creatures near him was dangling on high two or three men of his helpless crew. The whole outfit was in the power of the devil-fish!

And then their captors moved forward with them on a ghastly march of triumph. . . .

But Keith Wells did not know that, crouched behind the instrument panel in the control room, shivering and sick with fear, was the plump form of Cook Angus McKegnie, who had just gained it just before the paralyzing ray had struck.

CHAPTER VI

The Monster with the Armlets of Gold

HEMINGWAY BOWMAN'S ardent wish, after he was whipped quickly through the round exit port of the octopi submarine, was for a quick, clean death. The horror and mystery of his situation had left him with one conscious emotion, that he was afraid. The worst had been when he was hauled through the port; when, expecting anything, he had been able to see nothing in the dark, water-filled mystery ship.

Deliberate tentacles had stroked over every inch of his body—tentacles that were not metal-scaled, as had been the arms of the creature that captured him. It was then that he guessed the true purpose of the metal suits the octopi wore—to protect their bodies against the lesser pressure near the surface of the sea. Inside the submarine they did not need them. He decided that the ship was used for rapidly transporting large numbers of the octopi to distant regions, and also for a weapon of offense and defense. The intelligence of the cuttlefish astounded him.

Keith had got away. At least he knew that, and he thanked God for it. His bold stroke had not been in vain, his sacrifice not useless.

After the inspection of the tentacles, Hemmy had been shoved to a corner of the octopi submarine. He had felt cords wrapped around his body. After being thus secured, he was left to himself. He was utterly alone, except for strange, vague shadows that floated through the darkness—shadows that heated his brain as he realized how many of the devil-fish there were.

Hours that seemed like endless days passed.

Bowman concluded that the submarine had gone straight through the cavern and emerged finally into what seemed to be another sea. Dead silence filled the ship. What was happening, he could only guess. The craft seemed to run on forever. Never once did tentacles brush or inspect him again.

FINALLY the ship stopped, and a great round door opened in one wall. By the soft bluish glow that seeped in Hemmy caught a glimpse of his surroundings, and his gorge rose at the sight. The ship was literally filled with a slowly waving forest of long black tentacles. Weird instruments, unlike anything he had ever seen, were grouped around the walls, and before them attendant octopi poised, their hideous eyes fixed and steady. There were no dividing decks as in the *NX-1;* the craft was one huge shell.

Then came furious activity. The door fell shut again, and the ship shot off at great speed. Hemmy felt sure that they were advancing to again attack the *NX-1,* and at once began to try to reach his comrades through radiophone. He knew that Wells would come back.

Finally he caught a human voice, and heard the *NX-1's* radio operator shout to the commander that he, Bowman, was alive and calling. But when he tried to speak further, the American craft's radio was silent.

And then, in the octopi submarine, had come a soft glow of violet.

Was it a more deadly weapon than the paralyzing ray? In great suspense the prisoner waited. Silence—silence! Horrible doubts beset his mind. Was Keith refraining from firing his torpedoes because he, Bowman, was on board the enemy boat? The thought stung him. He tried desperately again to reach Wells; but there was no answer. Were the Americans dead?

Age-long minutes passed. Then the

exit port opened and several metal-clad octopi swam out. Hemmy had a glimpse of the *NX-1* lying silent and apparently lifeless on the sea-floor, a gaping hole in her bow!

As if to taunt him with the sight, the creatures left the round door open, and presently Bowman beheld the octopi open the *NX-1's* starboard exit port and enter. Later the port swung open again, and he saw the monsters emerge, each gripping several men clad in yellow sea-suits! That they were dead, or victims of the ray, was obvious from the way they limply dangled.

The exit port closed, and darkness filled the octopi ship. Hemmy Bowman panted with the futile effort to break his bonds.

"You devils!" he yelled in blind rage, exhausted. "Why don't you take me with them? Take me! Take me, damn your stinking hides!"

WHEN Keith Wells was taken from the silent *NX-1*, a host of astounding impressions swarmed his brain. Swinging lightly at the end of his captor's tentacle, he strove as best he could, with eyes rigidly fixed straight ahead, to grasp his new surroundings. He had, first, one flash of the octopi ship lying quite close to them, its hulk, as always, immobile and apparently lifeless. And inside it, he was sure, was his friend and first officer, Hemmy Bowman—a captive.

He saw that the octopi submarine had towed the *NX-1* into one of the weird mound cities. His own ship was lying in what seemed a kind of public square, and crowds of black octopi were swarming around it as he and his crew were brought out. Shooting straight off the square ran one of the wide streets he had previously seen from above, and on each side the brown mound-buildings rose. Their details were hazy, because of the cuttlefish inhabitants who swam thickly in front of them.

His captors started their march down this broad street. Great crowds of reddish-colored octopi clustered on each side of it; other swarms hung almost motionless—except for their constantly writhing tentacles—above, so that their line of progress was through what resembled a restless, living tunnel of repulsive black flesh, snaky arms and huge, unblinking eyes. Keith felt faint from the horror of it. Thousands of the monsters were there, all hanging in the soft, blue-glowing water; and occasionally, as he floated almost horizontally in his captor's firm grip, his legs would brush the wall of clammy flesh; or perhaps one of the tentacles would reach out as if to touch him.

The octopus that held him swam some five feet off the street bed itself; at intervals the thick swarm on either side would part for a second, and Keith could glimpse the huge mound buildings, ever growing larger, with round entrance holes dotted all over their smooth surface, above as well as the sides.

The march was ghastly. Their captors were taking them through the heart of the water-metropolis; displaying their human captives as did the Caesars in Roman triumphs of old!

THE swarming crowds of tentacled monsters grew thicker as they progressed, and their tentacles began to whip more quickly, as if anger was burning in their loathsome bodies. Keith noted the menace of their sharp-beaked jaws, and the sickening sucker-discs on the livid under-side of the tentacles. As far as he could see, the swarms fell in behind the procession after it had passed. Following them—where?

Just as Wells felt himself on the verge of fainting, the procession turned to the right and entered the largest mound-building of all, a vast dome rising in the very center of the octopi metropolis. They continued through a corridor perhaps twenty feet high, from which at intervals other corridors branched. Held by one arm, and ever and again turning helplessly

over in his horizontal transit, Keith caught glimpses of walls covered with intricate designs on a basic eight-armed motif—designs of artistic value, that gave evidence of culture and civilization.

The passage ended as suddenly as it had begun, and they came into the main body of a gigantic building.

The commander could hardly credit his eyes. The place resembled a stadium, and was so vast that he felt dwarfed to nothingness. The domed roof soared far above in misty bluish light. On the floor, exactly beneath the center of the great dome, was a raised platform, and on it a dais resembling a very wide throne. Around the dais a score or more of octopi—officials, Keith supposed—were grouped.

Rapidly the creatures following the procession swam into the chamber. Monstrously large as the place was, the floor soon was filled with the thick flood of cuttlefish which swarmed in from many doors. Keith, held with the other captives just to one side of the hole he had entered by, began to think that they must soon refuse to let any more in—when, to his surprise, he saw the latest arrivals begin to form a gallery twenty feet above those on the ground floor, and, when this was extended far back and completely filled, start yet another above it—and another, and another. In ten minutes the mighty hall was crowded with countless layers of the cold-eyed monsters, each layer angling up from the central dais so that all could see.

"God!" the commander thought. "Nothing but solidly-packed devil-fish all the way to the dome! A slaughter pit! And we, of course, are to be the cattle!"

MINUTES passed. The throne was still empty, and the thousands in the amphitheater seemed waiting for an occupant. Keith wished he was able to close his eyes. The restless, never-ceasing weaving of the countless tentacles in the levels above made the scene a nightmare. Some waved slowly, others whipped excitedly, but never for an instant did one pause. The movements were like the never-ceasing shifting and swaying of the trunks and feet of elephants; in the dim glow the huge chamber seemed to be filled with one fantastic, million-tentacled monster that stared with its thousand eyes down on the forlorn group of puny human beings. . .

As if at a command the arms of the octopi on the platform suddenly began to weave in perfect unison in some weird ceremony. First they swayed out towards the waiting captives, then they swerved slowly to the empty throne. Then came a few quick, excited whippings; and once more the long arms reached out at the small group at the entrance. This went on for some minutes. Then, very suddenly, a creature swam up from what must have been an opening in the floor onto the dais-throne.

Keith saw it well.

It was an octopus, a giant amongst octopi, and Wells knew at once it was the ruler of the realm, the lord and master of the swarming galleries and the cities of mound-buildings.

It was larger than its fellows by a full three feet. And, encircling each great tentacle just where it joined the central mass of flesh, was a broad, glittering band of polished gold—eight thick armlets that ringed the creature's revolting head-body with a circle of gleaming pagan splendor. Keith could almost fancy that a certain royal air hung over the monster.

The huge, unblinking eyes of the king stared at the horror-frozen captives. One long tentacle lifted slowly upward, and their captors at once started towards the throne with them. The score of octopi on each side stilled their weaving arms. A battery of emotionless eyes drilled into Wells' paralyzed body. He felt faint. Unquestionably the horrible ceremony was leading up to some form of cold-blooded sacrifice. . . .

THE monarch stretched a mighty arm towards Keith, and, as in a dream, he felt himself lifted out of his guard's grasp. The snakelike tentacle gripped him about the waist, and held him dangling like a puppet twenty feet in the water while the two deadly eyes stared steadily at him. He was brought closer, until the hideous central mass, with its cruel beaked jaw and ink sac hanging behind, was no more than a foot away.

Then another arm stroked slowly along the commander's helpless body. Once or twice it prodded sharply, and Wells felt a surge of fear, for his seasuit might break. Deliberately the prying tentacle moved over him, delicately feeling his helmet, his weighted feet, his legs.

Keith Wells grew angry. He was being inspected like a trapped monkey! He, commander of the *NX-1*, representative of one of the world's mightiest nations—prodded and stared at by this fish, this octopus! A great rage suffused him, and with a terrific effort he tried to jab his arms into one of those devilish eyes. But try as he might, his body would not respond. He could not move a finger.

For a long time the loathsome inspection continued, until the monstrous king seemed satisfied. Wells was handed back. There followed an interminable period in which nothing whatever was done, as far as he could see. He was sure that they must be talking, debating, but no sound reached his ears through the tight helmet. All the time the endless motion in the swarming levels above went on. It became hazy, dreamlike, and in spite of himself the commander began to feel drowsy. The weaving and swaying was producing a hypnotic effect. At last the desire to sleep grew overpowering.

Wells and his men were more than half unconscious when their original captors finally pulled them back from the royal presence and began a humble retreat from the throne room. Slowly they backed to the entrance. Keith's last drowsy glimpse was of a grotesque, gold-ringed monster on a throne, with a score of smaller tentacled creatures around him, and a vast haze of weaving tentacles and unblinking eyes above.

They passed from the huge chamber. The commander felt delirious, as in a nightmare, but he knew that they were again in the long corridor, and that their captors were taking them further into the mighty building, further from the street outside. He glimpsed great rooms branching off the corridor, and swarms of black octopi inside them. The light became fainter; and at last the procession turned into a separate, rough-walled chamber, dimly lit and empty.

Wells felt the grip around his arm loosen, and he floated limply to the floor among his men. He slept. . . .

CHAPTER VII

The Glass Bell Jar

KEITH awoke hours later.

Slowly he became conscious of a cramped, stiff body, of a dull pain racking his head. He stretched out his limbs—and, suddenly, realized he could move.

Remembering the paralyzing ray that had struck him down, and half afraid that his senses were tricking him, he kicked his left leg out. It moved with its old vigor. He quickly found that his strength had returned, that he could feel and move. The effect of the ray had worn off!

With a glow of new hope he rose to his feet and exercised numb muscles. Looking around, he saw the other men still stretched out on the floor of their rough-walled, watery prison. He called into his radiophone mouthpiece:

"Graham! Graham, wake up!" A grotesque figure stirred among its fellows; turned over. "It's Wells, Graham," Keith continued. "Get up; you can, now!" And he watched the form of his big first officer stretch out and finally rise, while stupid, sleepy sounds came to his radio receiver.

"Why—why, the paralysis is gone!" Graham said at length.

"Yes, but maybe the octopi don't know it. Rouse the other men at once, and we'll see what we can do."

It was weird, the sight of the lifeless figures of the men stirring to life in the dim-lit water as Graham shook each one's shoulder. The radiophones buzzed and clicked with their excited comments and ejaculations. Keith felt much better. With his men restored to strength, and clustered in a determined, hard-fighting mass, he saw a hope of breaking out and regaining the *NX-1*.

He let them exercise as he had for some minutes, then proceeded to a brisk roll-call. There should be fifteen men and two officers. Rapidly Graham ran over the names, and each time a voice rang back in reply—until he came to the cook.

"McKegnie? Cook McKegnie?"

There was no answer. Wells stared around the group of dim figures and himself called the name again. But McKegnie was not present. And as the commander and his men realized it the numbing spell of their desperate position settled down on them again like a shroud.

Keith shook off the mood. "Well," he muttered, "I guess the devils got him. Poor McKegnie's seen the wheels go round for the last time. . . All right: take command, Graham. I'm going to do a little reconnoitering."

THE round entrance hole was some fifteen feet from him, at the far end of the cell. Keith advanced cautiously to it, the peculiar light feeling the water gave him making his steps uncertain. The dim blue illumination made the details of the corridor outside hazy, shadowy, but it seemed to be empty. Peering out, Wells could sight no guarding octopi. He edged closer and stared down to the left. Twenty feet away the vague light tapered into darker gloom, filled with thick, wavering shadows; but it was apparently devoid of tentacles. He wondered if the octopi were unaware that the effects of their ray had worn off, and peeped cautiously around the edge to the right.

Immediately a long arm whipped out, grasped him around the waist and flung him twisting and turning back into the chamber. Graham laboriously made his way to the commander and helped him to his feet. "Hurt, sir?" he asked anxiously.

"No," Keith gasped. "But that devil—"

He stopped short. The first officer turned and followed his commander's stare.

The entrance hole of the cell had filled with a monstrous shape. A huge octopus was resting there, its unblinking eyes coldly surveying the crew of the *NX-1*. On each of its thick tentacles was a broad band of polished gold. It was the king, the same creature that had inspected them from the throne-dais a few hours before. And behind him in the corridor the men glimpsed another octopus.

Slowly the ruler of the octopi swam into the chamber. Its great eyes centered icily on Keith Wells, standing at the head of his cowering men, and its mighty tentacles weaved slowly, gracefully, as if the creature stood in doubt. One of them tentatively reached out and hovered over their heads, moving uncertainly back and forth. Then, like a monstrous water snake, the tentacle poised, flicked out and plucked a man from his comrades.

His shriek of terror rasped in their earphones. "Steady, men!" Keith cried. "It's hopeless to try and fight them! The monster just wants to look him over!"

THE man—Williams, a petty officer—was dangled by the armpit in mid-water and made to slowly revolve. The tip of another huge arm snaked out and for some seconds stroked his body, probing curiously. He panted with fright, and in their earphones his friends could hear his every tortured

exhalation. Anxiously, Keith watched. Then, without warning, another tentacle darted up, fastened its tip on the breast of the captive's sea-suit, and deliberately ripped it open.

The doomed man's last scream rang in their helmets as the water poured into his suit. They saw him writhe and struggle desperately in the remorseless grip which held him. The two huge eyes of the cuttlefish surveyed his death throes minutely; watched his agonized struggles gradually weaken; watched his legs and arms relax, his head sink lower. . And then the tentacle let a lifeless body float to the floor.

Jennerby, a huge engineer, went completely mad. "I'll get him, the devil!" he yelled, and before Keith could command him to stay back, had flung himself onto the giant king.

Death came as a mere matter of course. Without apparent effort, the monarch ripped off Jennerby's helmet and sent him spinnning back. The man's body writhed and shuddered, and in a moment another stark white face showed where death had struck.

Trembling, sick at heart, the commander yet had to think of his men. "For God's sake," he cautioned them, "keep back. Don't try to fight now; we've got to wait our chance! Steady. Steady. . ."

The king's deliberate tentacle again began its slow weaving. It was choosing another victim. And this time it darted straight out at Keith Wells and gripped him with a mighty clutch about the waist.

The commander did not cry out. As he was brought close to the staring eyes, and felt their sinister gaze run over him, it flashed through him for some obscure reason that the monster knew him for what he was, the leader, from the tiny bars on each shoulder of his sea-suit. . . He waited for the tentacles to rip it open.

But they did not. Instead, the creature turned and swiftly swam with him out through the entrance hole.

THEY went to the left in the corridor, further into the heart of the building. The bluish light became stronger. As Keith twisted in the giant monarch's grip he glimpsed the other octopus following with the two dead men. He saved his strength knowing it was hopeless just then to try and struggle free.

Quick as was his passage, he noticed that the walls of the corridor were covered with intricate designs, in bas-relief, and colored. He passed row after row of mural paintings of octopi in various activities, and guessed that they represented the race's history. One was obviously a scene of battle, with a tentacled army locked in combat with another strange horde of fishlike creatures; a second showed the construction of the queer mound-buildings on the sea-floor, with scores of monsters hauling great chunks of material into place, and another pictured the huge audience chamber, with a gold-banded king motionless on his throne.

As the king drew him rapidly along, he had a glimpse through a circular doorway of a large room, inside which were clustered the black shapes of thousands of baby octopi, tended by what were evidently nurses. Other such rooms were passed, and the young commander's brain whirled as he tried to measure the size and progress of this undersea civilization. Perhaps the race of octopi was growing, reaching out; needed new room to colonize. That would explain why their submarine had been sent through the tunnel. . .

A voice sounded in his ears:

"Keith? Are you all right?" It was Graham, calling from the cell behind.

"So far," Wells assured him. "I'll keep in touch, and let you know what happens."

At that moment, his captor carried him into a large chamber at the end of the corridor. He looked around, and decided it was a laboratory. He beheld strange instruments, anatomical charts of octopi on the walls and, in one corner, a small jar of glass, in which a dull

flame was burning. Many-shaped keen-bladed knives lay on various low tables, and thin, wicked-looking prongs and pincers.

"I'm in their experimental laboratory, Graham," Wells spoke into the mouthpiece of his tiny radio. And then his roving eyes saw something that made him audibly gasp.

"What's the matter, Keith?" came the first officer's anxious voice.

After a moment the commander answered. "It's—it's a pile of human bodies. The bodies of those fishermen. They—they've been experimenting on them. . . ."

WAS he, too, Wells wondered, to be experimented on? The sight of that stacked pile of bodies chilled him with horror. He kept his eyes from them, till the octopus with the golden bands swung him through a hinged door in the farther wall.

He found himself in a side room, smaller than the outer chamber, the whole center of which was occupied by a huge glass bell jar, some thirty feet in diameter. Inside it was much strange-looking apparatus on tables, and trays of operating instruments—knives like those in the outer room, and the same thin prongs. The great jar was empty of water, and on one side was an entrance port.

The king tossed Keith into a corner and quickly donned a metal-scaled water-suit. When he had it all on, and the glass body-container fastened into place, he picked up his captive again and advanced through the bell jar's entrance port into a small water chamber. A moment later Wells felt his body grow heavy as the water of the compartment ran out, and then there was a click and he found himself inside the jar, still held in the merciless grip of a tentacle.

He twisted around to find the cold eyes of the octopus staring at him only a foot away. And as he wondered what was going to happen next, the king unfastened the glass face-shield of the commander's sea-suit with a quick flip of the tip of a tentacle.

Keith's arms were pinned to his sides; he could not move to try to refasten the face-shield. Fearful, he held his breath; held it until his face was purple and his lungs were near to bursting. But at last the limit was reached, and with a great wrench he sucked in a full breath.

It was clean, fresh air!

THE air was like a breath of his own world brought down to this cold realm of octopi. Once he had caught up with his breathing it poured new life into his limbs, jaded from the artificial air of the sea-suit. Keith felt his muscles respond, felt his whole body glow with new strength and life. Twelve inches away the king was watching his every reaction closely through the huge helmet of glass. The thought passed through the commander's mind that he was not only king, but chief scientist of this strange water civilization.

Then, while his lungs swallowed hungrily the good, fresh air, several tentacles began to feel around him in an attempt to unfasten the rest of his sea-suit.

Wells blanched at the sudden realization of how helpless he would be if the suit were taken from him. He would then not only be a prisoner of the octopi, but a prisoner of the glass jar, unable ever to leave it, and more than ever at the mercy of his captor's least whim. Not that he had any delusion that he would live long in any case: it was just the simple strong instinct of self-preservation that made him grab at every chance for life.

This thought flashed through his mind, even while the octopus was fumbling with the catches of his suit. And along with it was born a desperate plan of escape. He was in his own element, air; the octopus out of his. If he could crack the glass of the king's helmet, and let the water out and air in! The glass was only twelve inches away.

The commander stopped his resistance, and at the same time felt about with his legs until he had them well braced against a lower tentacle. He pushed gently, and came a few inches nearer the glass; a little more. Then, with a quick, strong jerk of his body he crashed the steel frame of his helmet square against the cuttlefish's sheathing of glass.

The creature was taken wholly by surprise. Tentacles whipped out to tear the rash human quickly away—but not before Keith had pounded again, and heard the splinter of smashed glass! He had jabbed a hole in the glass body-piece, and already the life-giving water was pouring out!

PANIC seized the king, and he became a nightmare of tortured tentacles. Wells was flung wildly away and fetched up against the side of the jar with a crash that for a second stunned him. More and more water poured from the octopus' suit, and air at once rushed in to take its place. The creature's great eyes became filmy, while the revolting spidery body slewed here and there across the jar, all the time whipping and thrashing at the strangling air. Keith scurried from side to side, trying to keep out of reach of the crazy, writhing tentacles. Once a glancing blow knocked him flat, but the monster was altogether unconscious of him and he got away.

Little by little the terrific whipping and coiling of the tentacles quieted down. The drowning king lay in one place now; its loathsome red body, no longer protected by glass, turned bluish. Keith thrilled with elation at his victory.

And then, for the first time, he noticed that there was a full three inches of water on the floor—far too much to spill from the king's suit. A quick look around showed him where it came from. There was a long crack in the side of the glass jar, at the place where he had been crashed against it—and water was pouring in!

Keith flung himself against the crack, jammed his arm into the broadest part of the leak. But still the water rushed in. The octopus was in its death throes, weakening steadily—but just as steadily the water poured in and rose up the sides of its body. In a flash Wells saw that the liquid would win the race to cover it and allow the monster to resume breathing.

"Oh, damn it!" he cursed fervently. "Now I've got to run for it!"

HE stumbled to the port, snapping shut his face-shield as he went. In a moment he had solved the working of the mechanism and was in the water chamber, then outside in the room itself. Fortunately his sea-suit was unhurt. He thanked heaven for that as he tore away a boardlike piece of apparatus and jammed it over the leak in the jar.

Keith paused a moment to plan. The king of the octopi was still writhing in ever weakening struggles, but the water was halfway up his body. "It'll cover him soon," thought the commander, "and then it's a question how long it'll take him to come to. I've got to move fast—slip out into the corridor and run the gauntlet back to the men." His eyes rested on a large knife, and he appropriated it, since he saw nothing else he might use.

For the first time since the beginning of the fight he answered the questions and exclamations that had constantly sounded in his ears from the distant crew. Tersely he told them what had happened, and of the gauntlet he had to run.

"Make ready for a dash to the *NX-1*," he finished. "It's now or never. Wait three minutes for me, and if I don't make it, go ahead anyway. Remember—three minutes. This is an order. So long, fellows!"

He shut his ears to the bedlam of comment that followed. His knife ready, he took a few steps to the door and pushed out—right into the tentacles of a waiting octopus.

HIS knife was useless. While locked motionless by three arms of his captor, another streaked out and wrenched it from his hand. Once again Keith was absolutely helpless.

Great confusion resulted in the laboratory. The commander heard no sound, but the guard must have called, for five more octopi darted rapidly out of an adjoining room. Their tentacles writhing in great excitement, they swam past and into the inner chamber to the rescue of their nearly drowned king.

The devil-fish that held Wells almost crushed him to death in its excitement. It was obviously undecided what to do; but finally it sped him down the passageway and cast him back inside the cell with his men. Then it quickly retreated.

The commander staggered to his feet and faced Graham and the others. "A miracle!" he gasped; "I'll tell you later. But now we've got to make our break. The king's out, and we've got to get away before they bring him to. There's nothing to do but rush the door. It means sure death for half of us, and probably for all—but God help us if the king catches us!"

He paused and surveyed them keenly. "Everybody with me?" he asked. And not one man held back his answer.

Wells smiled a little. "Good!" he said.

THERE were twelve men and two officers. There were thousands of octopi. On the face of it, their chances seemed hopeless. Not for a second did Keith count on getting many men to the *NX-1*. But he knew where the submarine was, and he had to try.

Tersely he gave them final instructions.

"This corridor leads to the main entrance. That is, to the right—understand? Then straight down the street outside, to the left, is the square where they towed the *NX-1*. I'd say it was a hundred yards.

"There's one guard outside. Graham, you and half the men to the right of the door. I'll take the rest to the left. Our only chance is to try and destroy the octopus' eyes."

His mind cast about desperately for some form of weapon. The only detachable thing on their sea-suits was the small helmet-light, a thing, Keith told himself, without possible offensive use. Still, the beams would enable them to more clearly see their path and keep together, so he ordered them in hand.

The men were grouped and alert. The moment had come.

"Remember," he said, "—its eyes. Then stick together and run like hell. All right—good luck—and let's go!"

Awkwardly, stumbling clumsily in the retarding water, the small group surged through the door. Immediately a black shape pounced upon them from the clustered shadows—the guarding octopus.

Its tentacles seemed to be everywhere. In seconds five men were clutched in its awful grip, their fists rising and falling impotently as the hideous arms constricted and crushed them inward. Keith, free of the clasp, yelled: "The eyes! The eyes! Put out its eyes!"

FOR answer, a yellow arm clutching a helmet-light broke through the grotesquely milling mass and struck at the cuttlefish's great pools of eyes. It missed, but the switch flicked on, and there stabbed through the gloom a broad, glaringly white ray.

Its effect was astounding. The beam smote the octopus squarely in its huge eyes, and immediately the creature shuddered; writhed with pain. The tentacles released the men—and the monster fled back into the protecting shadows!

A shout from the men roared in the commander's earphones. "They can't stand the light!" he cried. "Thank God! Beams on, everyone! Flash 'em in their eyes! Forward!"

Fourteen shafts of eye-dazzling

light forked through the corridor. The tiny company, beating their path with criss-crossing shafts of white, forged ahead. They thrashed the shadows with their beams, probing each inch of water—clearing their way even as a tank hoses machine-gun bullets before its clumsy body. Their former slender chance grew; they filled with hope.

Another swarm of devil-fish, long arms whipping before them, raced from branching corridors and bore down on the company of humans. The men were ready, and fourteen tongues of white met them squarely. They faltered; the weight of their fellows behind shoved them on; but the rays steadied, and the front row of octopi broke in panic. The others at once followed in wild retreat.

"Keep together, men!" Keith ordered sharply. "One beam to each octopus—straight in its eyes-till it retreats! Forward!"

THEY pressed on. The octopi, with eyes used only to the soft blue glow of the cavern, could not stand against the brilliant rays. Keith leading, the *NX-1's* crew stumbled out into the street.

They faltered a moment when they saw each entrance hole of the mound-buildings shooting out streams of octopi. Hundreds were in sight already. The whole city was evidently alarmed. Wells at once formed his men in a circle, so their beams would guard them on every side and above. Apparently the octopi could not approach within thirty feet of them, and even at that distance they turned and fled, writhing with pain, whenever a shaft of light struck full in their eyes.

"The square's just ahead!" the commander roared. "One last rush, now, and we'll reach the submarine! Stick close; keep your arms locked; and watch out above!"

The circle of men narrowed. The rays gave their tiny cluster the appearance of a monster even more fantastic than those moiling around them—a monster with long straight tentacles of glaring white. They stumbled forward through the magically parting ranks of black octopi. The beams kept the creatures back; they were helpless before them.

Foot by foot under the inverted bowl of threshing tentacles the *NX-1's* crew lumbered ahead. The street at last ceased; the wide square opened before them.

"We're here!" Wells yelled exultantly. "This is the—"

His voice fell into abrupt silence. He stared around the square, and his heart went cold indeed. They had reached the right place, but it was empty.

The *NX-1* was not there!

CHAPTER VIII

Cook, the Navigator

THROUGH all these hours, one man had remained on the *NX-1*, and that man was, to put it mildly, scared to death.

Cook Angus McKegnie had been nearest the connecting ladder when Keith Wells roared out the command to retreat above, and his desire to regain a place of safety was so earnest that he made the control room in record time. At once he had felt the tingle of the paralyzing ray. Struck by a horrible thought, he ventured to peer down the ladder—and groaned to see the figures of his comrades, all lying limply on the deck. His portly frame quivered like jelly as realization came to him that he was the only one who had escaped the ray.

Heroic ideas of saving the submarine, of rescuing the men below, flashed wildly through his head. But only for a moment. On second thought, he felt he ought to hide. So, in the tomblike silence that had fallen, the two-hundred-and-twenty-pound McKegnie wormed a way behind an instrument panel, effecting the journey by vigorous shoves of his stomach. It was minutes later that he first noticed that some sharp jutting object was jutting

deep into his ample paunch, but he could do nothing to remedy it. He was hidden, anyway, and he was going to stay hidden!

The cook felt the *NX-1* being towed forward. Then, after a dreadful wait, he heard queer noises down below, and was positive the exit ports had opened. The snakelike slithering and shuffling which followed would mean that the enemy was inside the *NX-1*. The thought brought St. Vitus' dance to his limbs, and, try as he might, he couldn't still them. Then again the ports opened, the gloomy silence returned, and Angus McKegnie was alone with his reflections.

AFTER the first hour he gave voice to them in one simple, bitter sentence. "Just why the hell," he muttered, "did I ever join the Navy?" The silence offered no reply, and McKegnie, desperate from his cramped position, ventured to poke his head around the instrument panel. The faint emergency lights showed the control room to be empty. He decided to come out, and did so, worming his way back with great difficulty.

Once out, the first thing his eyes fell on was the teleview screen. Now the cook had never seen one of the octopi, and the screen showed hundreds of monsters clustering around the *NX-1*. So with unusual promptness he acted, jamming himself once again into his hiding place. Maybe, he thought, they had some way in which they could see into the control room and discover him!

Hours passed. The cook was sopping with sweat. Finally his thoughts emerged into words.

"I got to get out of here!" he said intensely. "I *got* to! And I got to run this submarine!"

The sound of his voice somehow emboldened him. Once more he backed out of his cranny, and with cautious, trembling steps explored the control room. He kept his eyes from the teleview, though it had a terrible fascination for him, and surveyed the *NX-1*'s array of control instruments. The prospective navigator groaned at the sight.

There were dozens of mysterious wheels, jutting from every possible angle, squads of black and red-handled levers, whole armies of queer little stud-buttons and dials. His knowledge of cooking helped him not at all in the presence of that maze of devices. Timidly he touched one of the levers, but immediately snatched his hand away as if afraid it would bite. His boldly announced purpose of running the craft went glimmering.

AN accidental glimpse of the monsters in the teleview suddenly decided him that he needed a weapon. He hunted frantically through the lockers and found three service revolvers, which he fastened at his waist, adding his own carving knife to the arsenal. But he didn't feel much better. Then, remembering for the first time his sea-suit radio, he yelled: "Mr. Wells! Mr. Wells! Oh, Mr. Wells, where are you? Can you hear me?" There was, of course, no answer.

He tried to bring his muddled thoughts and fears to order. "I got to run this thing," he said doggedly. "*Got* to! Now, let's see: what the hell's this thing for? . . What the—"

He broke off short, and his eyes went wide. He had heard a noise!

Yes—there it was again! The same peculiar scraping at one of the exit ports! He glanced fearfully at the teleview. "Oh, Lord!" he yelped. "They're comin' in to get me!"

He started to dive back behind the instrument panel, but stopped, drew two guns, and in an agonized muddle trotted back and forth for a moment, waving them. Another look at the screen showed that an exit port was open, admitting two metal-scaled octopi. McKegnie couldn't stand it any longer: he wedged himself behind his panel again. Soon sounds of the metal tentacles on the deck below told him

that one of the creatures was coming up the ramp—then slithering into the control room itself. The cook was a lather of cold perspiration.

For a few minutes there was silence. The octopus was apparently surveying this new part of the submarine. Then, without warning, the tip of a metal-scaled tentacle felt around the panel and crept, exploring, up Angus McKegnie's leg—which leg was again suddenly afflicted with St. Vitus' dance. The tentacles coiled, pulled hard—and the cook with a yowl was yanked out into the room.

DANGLING upside down, high in air, he submitted to the fishy stare of the great eyes under the sheathing of glass. But soon he started to squirm, and his violent contortions brought a rush of blood to his head, making him quite dizzy. It was while he was in that state that things started to happen.

First, a great roar rolled through the *NX-1*, and McKegnie found himself flat on the floor with his breath knocked out. Then, while this was registering on his mind, he discovered himself the center of a madly milling set of tentacles, and instinctively scrambled out of the way. From a distance he saw that the tentacles belonged to the octopus that had held him, and that their coilings and threshings were gradually dying down, until only a quiver ran through them from time to time. While McKegnie was trying to figure this all out he noticed that the monster's glass sheeting was shattered, that it lay in a pool of water, and that the odor of burnt powder was in the air. Looking down he found that he had a gun in his hand. A thin wisp of smoke was curling from the barrel.

"Gee whiz!" he ejaculated. "Gee *whiz!*"

As he stood there recovering from his surprise, he heard the other octopus crawling up the connecting ramp, coming to see what had befallen its fellow. Preceded by two trembling guns, McKegnie tiptoed to the ramp and peered down.

From the darkness he saw another complicated mass of metal tentacles and glass advancing up towards him. Fear smote the cook, and almost without volition he pointed his guns and pulled the triggers. As before, a bullet crashed into the great dome of glass, and he watched a short but terrible death struggle. He had, by himself, slain two octopi!

A tremendous elation filled McKegnie—until it occurred to him that his shots might have been heard outside. At once he ran and looked at the teleview screen, and what he saw on its silver surface took all the triumph abruptly out of him. The octopi outside were darting about with alarming activity; a whole cluster of them was centered at the exit port, and, even as the cook stared, the preliminary sounds of opening it came to his ears.

"Now I *got* to run this ship!" he groaned.

HE peered at the mass of levers and wheels, put out a hand, closed his eyes, hesitated, and pulled one of them back. Nothing happened.

He tried another. The noise below grew, but still the *NX-1* remained motionless. Desperate, the cook jerked several other levers. The whine of electric motors surged through the silence; the submarine shuddered and slewed off to the right, as if trying to dig into the sea-floor.

"I got it started!" he cried. He did something else. The *NX-1* stuck her bow dizzily up and sped into the misty-blue realm above in a grand, sweeping circle. The sea-floor with its mound-buildings and swarming octopi fell away behind with a rush.

"There!" muttered the triumphant cook. "But—how did I do it?"

The submarine was rising like a skyrocket. McKegnie remembered suddenly that Wells had said the cavern was only a few miles high; he must now be very near the top. He held his

breath while he pushed a likely looking lever the other way.

He was lucky. The *NX-1* capered like a two-year-old, kicked up her stern and bolted eagerly for the depths once more. Again the floor of the cavern rushed up at him, again he pulled the potent lever back, and again the submarine meteored upward.

This procedure went on for some time. McKegnie was only running an elevator. Was he doomed to dash up and down between floor and ceiling forever? He gave forth pints of sweat, now and then groaning as the submarine grazed horribly close to top or bottom. The dead octopus at his feet slithered limply around on the crazy-angling deck.

"I can't keep this up forever!" the cook said peevishly. "Now, what the hell's this thing for?"

HE turned it, and the *NX-1* halted in one of her dives and raced forward, midway between ceiling and floor. Her navigator relaxed slightly. He had found the major controls; at least he had been able to stop his dizzy game of plunging up and down. Then, just as he was beginning to wonder where he could go, a large red spot glowed at the edge of the location chart.

"Oh, Lord!" he cried. "That's the other submarine—an' it's comin' after me!"

Evidently it was, for the red spot rapidly approached the green one. The paralyzing ray tingled, and a moment later the enemy's huge bulk loomed on the teleview screen, a band of violet light spearing from one of her jutting knobs.

Frantically McKegnie juggled his levers, and then it was that the *NX-1* really showed what was in her. She emulated, on a grand scale, a bucking bronco: she stood almost on her nose, and threatened to describe somersaults; she tried it the other way, on her stern; she rolled dizzily; she all but looped the loop, and went staggering around the cavern in great erratic bounds that must have made the octopi think she was in the hands of a madman—which she practically was. Her designer would have had heart failure.

In the teleview screen the frantic McKegnie would see the octopi submarine rush erratically by with a flash of its violet heat ray; the location chart showed the red spot zigzagging drunkenly around the green one. Each boat made occasional short, crazy darts at the other; sometimes they would stand approximately still. It was a riotous game of tag, and McKegnie knew too well that he was "it."

During one brief pause the anguished cook found himself groaning aloud: "Oh, Mr. Wells, where are you? I can't keep this up! I can't! I can't!"

THERE were still several important-looking controls that were mysteries to him. But what if he should pull one and open all the exit ports? He shuddered at the thought.

Things had become nightmarish. The ship was pitted scores of places by the heat ray. The control room had grown stifling. McKegnie was losing pounds of flesh, and literally stood in a pool of his own perspiration. The octopi craft kept doggedly after the *NX-1*, no matter how often and effectually the sweating cook's reckless hands prevented her getting the heat ray home.

For a long time the two ships continued to race up and down. The *NX-1* would plunge, pirouette around the other, and scamper away towards the ceiling as if enjoying it all hugely, abruptly to forsake her course and come zooming down once more. She would weave in romping circles and seem to go utterly crazy as her jumbled navigator pulled his levers and turned his wheels in a frantic effort to get somewhere.

To get somewhere! Yes—but where?

"Oh, Mr. Wells, where are you?" the harried cook would bleat at intervals.

Or, plaintively: "Now, what the hell's *this* thing for?"

CHAPTER IX

At Bay

FOURTEEN humans stood at bay on the cold sea-floor, dazed by the ruthless stroke of ill-luck which had taken the *NX-1* from where they had left it.

"It's gone," whispered Graham over and over in a hopeless tone. Keith tried to pull himself together. He had to think of his men.

In a second, his whole plan, which had seemed to be approaching success so rapidly, was smashed by the disappearance of the submarine. Mechanically he kept his helmet-light playing into the ever-thickening eyes and tentacles around him, while he scanned the sea-floor nearby. It was filling more closely than ever with the black, writhing forms of the cuttlefish. The rays still held them back, but their great bulk loomed over the small party of humans like a sinister storm cloud. Soon, in their overwhelming mass, they would crush down, and the submarine's crew be conquered by sheer force of numbers.

"Look!" Keith cried. "There's where she was lying!"

He pointed out on the floor of the square a deep groove, obviously made by the hull of the *NX-1*. Its length and jaggedness seemed to denote that the submarine had tried to bore into the bed of the cavern itself. Wells was mystified. If the octopi-ship had towed her away, she would certainly not have gouged that deep scar on the sea bottom.

But he dismissed the strange disappearance from his mind. He had to work out a plan of action.

"Keep together, men, and follow that scar!" he ordered tersely. "There's a chance that the *NX-1's* somewhere further along!"

It was a futile hope, he knew—but there was nothing else. The tiny group, centered in the inverted bowl of black, writhing tentacles, lumbered onward.

THEN the octopi struck with another weapon, in an effort to dull the spearing beams of white. Here and there from the mass of black an even blacker cloud began to emerge. It quickly settled over the whole scene, pervading it with a pitchy, clinging darkness that obscured each man from his neighbor.

"Ink!" cried one of them. It was sepia from the cuttlefish's ink sacs—the weapon with which these monsters of the underseas blind and confuse their victims.

"Faster!" the commander roared in answer. "And for heaven's sake, keep together!"

They huddled closer. Under the protecting cloud of ink the mass of octopi pressed nearer. The struggle became fantastic, unreal, as the brilliant beams of white bored through the utter blackness searching for eyes which the men knew were there, yet could not see until their rays chanced upon them. Snaky shadows milled horribly close to the little group of bulging yellow figures. Blacker and blacker grew the water; they could not always see the monsters as they drove them back on each side. Now and then a bold tentacle actually touched one of them for a moment before its owner was thrust, blinded, away.

Suddenly the dark cloud cleared a little as the fight moved into an unseen current. Their range of vision lengthened to ten or twelve feet; they could dimly sense the looming mass of cuttlefish; and it was less often that one of the monsters darted forward, daring the rays of white, and became altogether visible. When this did happen, half a dozen dazzling beams converged on the octopus' eyes and drove it back in writhing agony.

The men were the hub of a grotesque cartwheel, whose spokes were intercrossing rays of white. They still forged onward along the groove, but moved more slowly now, and Keith Wells, tired to death, realized the combat could not go on much longer. Their

advance was useless; a mere jest. The *NX-1* had vanished. It would only be a question of time before their batteries gave out, or the swarms of octopi crushed in on the struggling crew. Their overwhelming numbers would tell in the end. . The men were silent, except for the occasional gasps which came from their laboring lungs.

AND then the king of the octopi appeared.

Keith had been wondering, in the aching turmoil that was his brain, where the gold-banded monarch was. He knew the monster had been rescued, and he dreaded coming face to face once more with that huge form. Now, armlets of glittering yellow suddenly flashed in the thick of the besieging tentacles, and two great evil eyes glared for a second at Keith Wells. The commander flung a burst of light at them and laughed crazily as the monster scurried back. For a few moments the king was not visible.

"Well, fellows," Wells said, "it won't be long now. His Majesty's back on the field." He grinned a little through his weary face. "I wonder what he'll hatch up to combat our helmet-lights? Watch close: he's damn clever!"

The commander did not have long to wonder. The vague wall of tentacles began retreating deeper into the ink. Keith could not imagine the reason for it, but held himself taut and ready. His men, likewise noting the move, unconsciously grouped closer, waiting tensely for they knew not what.

The king of the octopi had indeed hatched a plan of attack. After a moment the mass of creatures again became slowly visible, but this time when the rays shot out they did not hold them back. Could not—for their eyes were not visible.

"My God!" Wells cried. "They're coming backwards!"

IT was so. The octopi—no doubt under their ruler's orders—had turned themselves around, and now, with eyes directly away from the dazzling shafts of white, were closing slowly in on the humans from all sides. The helmet-lights were useless. They could not reach the creatures' eyes.

Tentacles coiling, whipping, interweaving, the wall of flesh pressed in. Death stared the helpless crew of the *NX-1* in the face. First Officer Graham shrugged his shoulders and said tiredly:

"Well, I guess it's all over. . Unless," he added with a feeble smile, "somebody figures a way to melt us through the sea-floor. ."

Keith Wells' face suddenly lit up with an idea. He swung around and roared:

"The hell it's over! We can go *up!*"

His crew understood at once. "What fools we—" Graham began, but Keith cut him short.

"Listen," he rapped quickly. "Jamb together in one bunch and lock arms tight. When I give the word, flood your suits with air. We'll go up like comets; crash right through the devils. . . Hurry! . . . All ready?"

He saw that they were. "Then, together—go!" he commanded.

As one man the crew adjusted their air-controls, bulging the sea-suits with air. Their weighted feet left the cavern floor at once, and, locked tightly together, the whole fourteen of them shot like a bullet to the living ceiling of unsuspecting cuttlefish above.

They hit with a terrific crash. Keith was momentarily stunned by the force of impact. He felt himself torn away from his men, felt a dozen tentacles snake over him, and mechanically stabbed out with his helmet-light. For a moment he was held; then the air and his light pulled him through, and he broke out through the top.

In his rocketing upward progress the extra oxygen rapidly cleared his mind. Glancing below he saw a great, dark, many-fingered cloud dropping rapidly away, and was glad to know that the octopi could not follow him into the lesser pressures above without their

suits. Over the dark cloud he glimpsed a few scattered pin-points of light—the helmet-beams of the other men. They were rising as swiftly as he.

"Thank God!" he murmured reverently. "We broke through! We broke through!"

CHAPTER X

The Return of the Wanderer

WELLS watched the several helmet-lights shooting upwards and wondered if they represented all the men that had got safely through the net of tentacles. Remembering the rocky ceiling they were rapidly approaching, he ordered the others to reduce speed by discharging air from their sea-suits. He received no articulate answer.

Although he cut down the rush of his own progress, it was with a jar that he bounded into the top of the cavern. As he dangled there, he beheld four light beams hurtling upward; his earphones registered crash after crash; and then he saw the beams go spinning down into the gloom again, weaving and crossing fantastically, the shock having jerked them from their owner's hands. Keith had lost his own helmet-light below, but peering around he could make out a few vague forms, bumping and twisting in the current.

"Graham!" the commander called. "Graham, you there?" After a moment his first officer's voice came thickly back.

"Yes—here. A bit groggy. That crash. . . ." Wells swam clumsily towards him.

"I guess only a few of us broke through," the commander said slowly. As the two officers hung at the roof, swinging grotesquely, one by one the other men came to their senses and reported their presence in the radiophone. Keith ordered them to cluster around him, and soon eight weird figures had grouped nearby. After a while they located two others, which brought their total to ten men and two officers. They looked a long time, but could not find any more. Two were gone.

DEEP silence fell over the tiny group. The dark mass of the rocky ceiling scraped their helmets; below, the bluish waters tapered into a thick gloom, hiding, miles beneath, the mound-buildings and swarming octopi.

One of the men spoke. His words were audible to everyone, and they voiced the thought in every brain:

"What're we going to do now?"

Keith had no answer. They had escaped the immediate danger, but it was only a temporary respite. The commander know it was hopeless to try and locate the tunnel leading to the outer sea, for they were very tired, and in their clumsy suits they would be able to swim only a few rods. Their helmet-lights were gone; they had played their last card.

"They're goin' to find us after a while," the pessimistic voice continued. "They'll send that submarine of theirs after us—or maybe they'll come up in their metal suits. . . ."

"Well," Keith replied with forced cheerfulness, "then we'll have to fight 'em off."

"Why not rip our suits an' end it now—" began another, but Graham's voice cut in sharply.

"Quiet!" he said. "I heard something!"

The men stilled abruptly. In tense silence their ears strained at the headphones. Wells asked: "What did you hear?"

"Wait!" Graham interrupted, listening intently. "There it is again! Listen! Can't you hear it? Why, it sounded like—like—"

Keith concentrated his whole mind on listening, but could catch nothing at all. He was just about to give up when he caught a faint, jumbled murmur—the murmur of a human voice.

"My God!" he whispered. The voice, little by little, grew, and Wells could distinguish words. They formed into

a complete sentence. Keith heard it plainly. It was:

"Now, what the hell's this thing for?"

UNMISTAKABLY, it was the voice of Cook Angus McKegnie, whom they all had thought dead.

Amazed, the men of the crew started to jabber. "Quiet!" Wells ordered sharply. He listened again. McKegnie's voice was growing quickly and steadily louder.

"McKegnie!" the commander cried excitedly. "McKegnie, can you hear me?" There was no answer. Patiently Wells waited a minute, every second of which increased the volume of his long-lost cook's bewildered tones. Again he tried.

"McKegnie! Can you hear me? This is Commander Wells. McKegnie!"

The cook's stammering voice came back:

"Why — why — is that you, Mr. Wells? Did I hear you, Mr. Wells?"

"Yes!" Keith shouted impatiently. "This is Commander Wells! For heaven's sake, McKegnie, where are you?"

"I don't know, sir!" the cook responded. "Where are you?"

Keith was for the moment perplexed. "But—but, are you a prisoner?" he questioned. And he could have sworn he heard a distinct note of pride as the invisible McKegnie replied: "Oh, no, sir! Not yet! These devils been tryin' their best to get me, but they couldn't! No, sir!"

Wells became more and more puzzled. "Then—but—you're not running the *NX-1*, are you?"

McKegnie's voice was much louder now, and growing every second. The note of pride persisted. "Of course, sir!" he confirmed. "It was kind of hard at first, with these octopises botherin' me, but I got onto it pretty quick. That octopis ship chased me with them heat rays for a long time, but I ain't seem them lately. I guess I kinda tired them out."

HIS last words grew louder with a rush, and from the dark depths beneath a long shape suddenly appeared, hurtling up at the group of astounded men in a zoom that bade fair to take it straight through the ceiling. It was the *NX-1*.

"Dive, man, dive!" Keith yelled. "Cook, pull that black-handled lever towards you! Yank it back! Yank it back! Quick!" He sighed with relief as he saw his madly-driven submarine pause, whip its nose downward, and crash back for the depths from which it had come.

The commander spoke rapidly. "McKegnie, listen: Leave the black lever halfway, so you'll level out. Straighten your helm. We're only a little above you; come round in a circle till I tell you to stop."

The *NX-1* came out of her dive, and, as the cook evidently shoved her helm over, went skirting around in a wide, drunken circle, some thousand feet below her regular crew.

"All right!" Keith shouted. The fear that the octopi submarine would dart back before he could get aboard his ship was looming in his mind. "You're at the helm, Cook; there's a wheel right over your head. Spin it around—oh, my God, there you go again!" He groaned while the *NX-1* went swooping off on a repetition of her crazy circle.

"Sorry, sir," the culinary navigator said thickly. "I guess I got the wrong thing."

"Now!" Wells roared. "Spin that wheel above your head. . . . That's right—right—there! Don't touch a thing, Cook! We're coming down."

THE submarine had paused directly beneath them, listing slightly to port. Then began the cautious business of the descent. Under Wells' rapid orders the men linked arms again and discharged more air from their sea-suits. Slowly, thin chains of bubbles rising behind them, they sank towards the dim shape of the *NX-1* below. Wells'

eyes kept probing the thick gloom far beneath. Every moment he expected to see it disgorge a swarm of octopi.

They neared the submarine, and saw numberless pitted spots in her body, where the heat ray had stabbed for a moment. In their excitement they missed their level by some feet, but clutching together they admitted more air and soon rose even with the starboard exit port.

"Swim forward," Keith ordered. "Hurry!" The weird figures groped clumsily, and very slowly neared the port. The commander, in the van, at last reached out and gripped its jutting external controls. He could not work them at first: his hands were numb and awkward.

As he tugged and struggled with them a shout rang in his headphone. It was McKegnie, scared to death.

"Oh, hurry, Mr. Wells!" he yelled. "Quick! Quick, please! The octopis ship's comin', sir! The red light's back!"

CHAPTER XI

To the Death

THE emergency steadied Keith's fingers. He got the door open and motioned Graham and six men inside the water chamber. The passage took but a minute. Then he sent the rest of the crew in, being himself the last to enter. When the chamber was finally empty, and Wells had stepped through the inner door onto the lower deck of the *NX-1*, a great sigh of relief broke from him. Never before had anything looked to good as that brilliantly lit deck with its familiar maze of machinery and bulkheads.

"Thank God," he said simply, and his joy was shared by the whole crew. A new feeling had come over them. Back home—in their own submarine, their own element—they had at least a fighting chance with the octopi. But Keith let them waste no time. He knew that a final, desperate duel to the death with their foe still was ahead. "Above to the control room," he ordered. "Fast!"

They lumbered up the connecting ramp. A disheveled, wild-eyed form met them. Keith couldn't help chuckling as he passed the now much thinner and paler cook, with the arsenal handy at his waist. On the deck of the control room lay a huge tentacled body, metal-scaled, with its dome of glass shattered and its great cold eyes staring unseeingly away. "I killed him," stammered McKegnie pridefully; "but Mr. Wells—look at that red light, sir!"

Keith glanced rapidly at the location chart, ripping off his sea-suit as he did. The fateful red stud was moving swiftly down on the motionless green one. The men had surrounded McKegnie, laughing and slapping him on the back, but the commander's terse orders jerked them abruptly back to action.

"The rectifiers, Graham: clean out this stale air. Sea-suits off; at emergency posts. Take the helm, Craig; you, Wetherby, trim the ship. No, no, Cook—keep away from the controls!"

The *NX-1* balanced herself; fresh air came rushing in, sweeping out the stale. Keith stared at the location chart, waiting for the submarine to be ready. The red light was almost upon them.

"Right!" he roared at last. "Diving rudder controls, Graham! Full speed for the tunnel!"

AT that moment the octopi ship swept into view, its full battery of offensive weapons flaring forth. The paralyzing ray tingled again and again over the control room. Someone laughed at its uselessness. The violet heat ray leveled full at them, but the commander avoided it with "Port ten, starboard ten! Maintain zigzag course to the tunnel." He understood the enemy's weapons now; he was throbbing with the fierce thrill of action. This duel was to be the climax of their whole adventure. "And, by heaven," he promised, "it's going to be a fight!"

The other craft seemed to realize the

NX-1 was now in expert hands. She raced along to starboard for some minutes, her heat ray trying vainly to steady on the American's weaving form. Wells wondered if the king of the octopi was aboard her, in command; he thought perhaps the ship had postponed her chase of McKegnie to pick him up. "I hope he is!" the commander breathed, and fingered the torpedo lever. He had some debts to pay.

The *NX-1*, engines working smoothly, proceeded on a desperate dash for the tunnel that led to the outer sea. But the octopi ship apparently knew what Keith intended, for she abandoned her offensive rays, changed course a few degrees and slowly but steadily pulled ahead. "Damn!" Keith exclaimed. "She'll get there before us!"

The dim shape dwindled on the screen, and before long her bulk had disappeared entirely. Wells then could watch her swift, straight progress only on the location chart.

TEN minutes later the funnel-like opening of the tunnel loomed on the teleview, and squarely in front, blocking it, was the waiting form of the octopi submarine.

"Quarter speed!" Keith snapped. "Hold her steady, Graham: I'm going to try a bow torpedo. I think we're beyond their ray."

Sighting his range on the telescopic range-finder, he worked the *NX-1* slowly into position. He noticed that his first officer was staring oddly at him. He was bothered by the queer look. "What's wrong?" he asked impatiently.

"But—what about Hemmy Bowman?"

Bowman! In the rush of action and suspense, Keith Wells had completely forgotten his officer in the enemy submarine. "Oh, God!" he groaned. The cruel situation that had stayed his hand once before had again come to falter his course of action. The men were watching him; Graham had a question in his eyes. They all knew what had to be decided. . . .

Keith shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. It was his greater duty to destroy the octopi submarine. And yet—

"Fish for Hemmy, Sparks," he ordered. "Craig, keep present distance from enemy. Full stop."

A moment later the radio operator looked up. "Mr. Bowman on the phones, sir." With a heavy weight on his heart the commander clipped on the extension headphones.

"Hemmy?"

"Keith? Keith? Thank God you're alive!" Bowman's voice shook with gladness. "You're all back on the *NX-1*, Keith? The whole crew's with you? Oh, Lord, it's good to hear you again!"

"Yes. We got back all right, Hemmy—a miracle. They've still got you prisoner?"

"Yes. . Keith—you're trying to dodge out of the tunnel, aren't you?"

WELLS smiled bitterly, and as he paused to frame an answer Bowman spoke again.

"I want you to blow up this submarine, Keith," he said quickly. "A favor to me."

He cut Wells short when the commander started to interrupt. "Wait! Let me finish," he pleaded. "I want to explain. I'd been hoping—but never mind that. . . Keith, a while ago I managed to work loose. I lost my head completely and tackled these devils. It was a foolish thing to do; they overcame me, naturally. But, in the struggle, they tore my sea-suit."

"What!"

"Oh, just a tiny tear, or I wouldn't have lasted till now. But a leak all the same—in the right leg. Since then I've been gripping the edges of the fabric as tightly as I can—but I couldn't keep the water inside this ship from seeping through. It came in slowly at first, then faster as my hands grew numb. It's up to my neck now, Keith . . and—it won't be long! I've just a few minutes left. ."

The faint words tapered into silence.

"No!" roared Keith in a great rush

of emotion. But Hemmy's eager voice came right back:

"Oh yes, you must! It would be a mercy to kill me, Keith."

There were tears in the commander's eyes. "Are you sure, Hemmy?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes. It would be a mercy."

Wells' lips formed a straight grim line. His words squeezed through it tightly. "All right, Hemmy. Thanks. Thanks. I—I'll go after them now, old man. I'll try and keep in touch with you through the duel, but I—I can't promise—"

He could almost see Hemingway Bowman give his old familiar smile as he answered:

"Then so long, Keith!"

COMMANDER KEITH WELLS studied the teleview screen. The men were half afraid to look at his strained blanched face.

Repeatedly the violet beam speared through the water, reaching for the *NX-1's* bow.

"Turn ship. Line up for stern torpedoes," the commander ordered harshly. He realized he could not hold his submarine steady to obtain a perfect sight, for the heat ray needed only thirty seconds to melt through their shell. He would have to swing the ship slowly about; and, as the shape of the enemy crossed the hair-lines on the range-finder, unleash his torpedoes and gamble on hitting the moving target.

The *NX-1* swung around, always maintaining a slight forward motion and zigzagging constantly to nullify the heat beam. Wells watched the range-finder closely. The octopi ship slanted downwards, the deadly violet ray stabbing from her bow. Slowly the black dot that represented her appeared on the dial, and slowly it dropped towards the crossed lines that showed the perfect firing point.

Keith grasped the torpedo lever. The *NX-1's* stern was towards her target. Dead silence hung in the control room. The *NX-1* swung slightly. The octopi craft appeared directly in the middle of the dial.

Wells pulled back the lever.

The hiss of compressed air sprang from her stern. He had fired two tubes, his whole stock of stern torpedoes. The pair of dreadful weapons leaped out and settled on their course. Keith shot his gaze to the teleview.

The torpedoes missed. Only by feet, but a miss all the same. They raced on past the octopi submarine and, with a tremendous, ear-numbing explosion, burst on the wall of the cavern beyond. Both ships reeled from the shock. Graham swore viciously, but Wells' masklike face showed no slightest change of expression. . . .

A voice rang in Keith's headphones. "Tough, Keith! Better luck next time!" Then the commander winced. He simply could not answer Hemmy Bowman; could not answer that fine, brave voice. . . .

THE stern torpedoes were gone. The tubes could not be reloaded, for the paralyzing ray bound the men to the control room. That left them two torpedoes in the bow.

The violet heat ray kept fingering hungrily on their outer hull, and every man knew that the plates were weakening under the steady strain, which was only lessened by the *NX-1's* constant zigzagging. The control room was very hot. Both ships were now a full mile from the tunnel entrance. Keith plunged the *NX-1* down, swung her around, to bring his bow tubes to bear, and zigzagged upwards.

It was obvious that the octopi craft had been alarmed by the terrific explosion. They now adopted tactics similar to the American ship's, and for awhile both submarines circled cautiously, maneuvering for an opening.

"If only we could keep the ship steady!" Graham muttered. "But then that heat ray'd get us!"

The commander kept his eyes on the teleview. Again and again the violet shaft pronged at them. The heat grew

stifling. Sweat was pouring from all the men's bodies. Every face was strained and taut.

"Starboard full!" Wells said suddenly. "A little up, Graham!" He had seen a chance; the octopi craft was slightly above, and in a moment would pass directly in the line of the bow tubes. The *NX-1* stuck her nose up, swung rapidly to the right. Keith pulled back the firing lever, releasing one torpedo.

The long messenger of death hurtled straight for the enemy's hull. They watched its course breathlessly. .

"My God!" the first officer groaned. "Could they see it coming?" For the octopi submarine had swung to one side, neatly dodging the speeding tube of dytramite.

"One left!" he added bitterly. "One left!"

A DESPERATE plan formed in Keith Wells' mind. His last torpedo simply had to strike the mark; he could take no chances with it. He motioned the haggard-faced Graham to him.

"There's only one thing left to do," he said quietly. "We've got to deliberately face that heat ray; chance its puncturing our plates."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Get in very close, so as to make our last torpedo sure to hit. We've got to approach the enemy head-on at full speed. We'll corkscrew up to them until we get within two hundred yards, then go straight forward for ten or fifteen seconds, giving us the opportunity to sight the remaining torpedo directly on them. The heat ray may break through before I fire—but when I do fire it's a sure hit."

The men had heard every word. Quietly Wells ordered:

"Take the torpedo control, Graham. I'll take the helm."

The first officer obeyed without a word. Keith grasped the helm. The plans were made for their last desperate attempt.

"Right," the commander said shortly. "Here we go."

THERE had been a taut silence before, but now, knowing that they were deliberately offering themselves a perfect target for the heat ray in order to get their last torpedo home, the tensity was almost unbearable. The men felt like shrieking, jumping—doing anything to break the awful hush. The air was charged with the same unnameable something that heralds a typhoon.

Keith Wells was like a white statue at the helm, save for the betraying trickles of sweat that coursed down his drawn cheeks. His hands moved the wheel slowly from port to starboard; his eyes bored at the screen before him. The ship was in command of a man of steel, a man with but one purpose. . . .

"Up—up," he ordered. "Hold—in trim—full speed forward!"

He had brought the *NX-1* directly in line with the octopi ship. And now the craft leaped forward under full power, while he shot the helm back and forth ceaselessly. His ship was describing a corkscrewing motion, weaving straight at the enemy. Grasping her opportunity, the octopi submarine remained motionless, steadily dousing the approaching American craft with her silent violet ray and driving the temperature in the control room to even greater heights.

The distance between them rapidly lessened. Would the plates stand it? Would the ray melt through the weakened steel before he could fire? With an effort Keith drove these doubts from his mind . . . but he could not banish a certain dull, steady ache from his consciousness. . . .

THE range dwindled. The heat became intolerable. Everyone's clothing was sopping wet. A man ripped off his shirt, gasping for air. Wells kept his eyes on the screen, though half-blinded by smarting sweat. The plates had to give soon, he knew.

The octopi submarine, beam on and dead ahead, began to move to port at quickly increasing speed. At once Keith stopped swinging the helm, and the *NX-1's* corkscrewing motion of protection ceased. And then came the real test, the gauntlet of seconds.

Right straight into the retreating violet beam they went, at top speed. They gained rapidly. The heat was furnace-like. The commander, watching the range-finder, kept moving the helm slightly over. A shaft of violet heat spanned the two shells of metal. For ten seconds it had held on the *NX-1*. The black dot of the enemy craft moved slowly to exact center on the dial. Fiften seconds twenty . . . twenty-three—

"Fire!"

Graham jammed the torpedo lever back.

"Crash dive!"

The deck tilted downward. And Wells' white lips formed the words, "So long, Hemmy!"—and he tore the phones from his head.

Seconds later a titanic explosion sounded through the cavern; echoed and re-echoed in vasty roars. The American craft's lights went off—but not before her men had seen, in the teleview, a fire-shot maelstrom where a moment before the octopi submarine had been.

"We got them!" yelled Graham.

A ROAR of exultation burst from every throat. The men flung their arms out, jumped, yelled crazily. Faint emergency lights lit the scene.

"Below, at regular posts," Wells ordered. "Reload bow and stern tubes. Graham, see to the lights." He himself remained at the helm. In a few moments the submarine had climbed back to the level of the tunnel. At quarter speed she nosed into the wide entrance, and slowly forged into the dense, deceptive shadows.

The commander acted mechanically. Again by touch he steered his ship through the black, ragged cleft. Fifteen minutes after leaving the cavern of the octopi her bow poked through the weaving kelp into the free, salty depths of the Atlantic Ocean.

There was one more task to perform, and Wells lost no time in doing it. When two hundred yards away he halted the *NX-1*, steadied her and sighted the stern tubes just above the dark tunnel hole. Quickly he sent forth two torpedoes.

A huge roar rumbled through the water, whipping the beds of kelp to mad convulsions. "Turn around," the commander ordered harshly. He sighted his bow tubes and again let loose a bolt of two torpedoes. Then he sent the submarine forward, and, through the teleview, examined what his four weapons had done.

Huge chunks of rock had been tumbled down, completely closing the tunnel.

"Well," said Graham, "it's over! Finished! They'll never get through that!"

A FULL-THROATED cheer burst from the men below, a cheer that rang for minutes as they realized they were free forever of the octopi, of the cold underwater city, of the clutching tentacles. Graham grinned broadly.

"Sound happy—eh?" he chuckled. "Say, Keith, it's good we've got those two octopi our fighting cook killed. Knapp would never believe our story without them!"

He stared curiously at his commander. Wells was standing quite still, facing the teleview screen. A strange, far-away look was in his eyes.

"What's the matter, old man?" the first officer asked, smiling straight at him. "Aren't you glad we won through?"

"Of course," answered Keith with a tired smile in return.

"But why did you look that way?" Graham persisted. And Keith Wells told him:

"I was just wondering if Hemmy told the truth."

"Look out!" He leaped to one side as he spoke.

The Black Lamp

By Captain S. P. Meek

"THE clue, Carnes," said Dr. Bird slowly, "lies in those windows."

Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service shook his head before he glanced at the windows of the famous scientist's private laboratory on the top floor of the Bureau of Standards.

Dr. Bird and his friend Carnes unravel another criminal web of scientific mystery.

"I usually defer to your knowledge, Doctor," he said, "but this time I think you are off on the wrong foot. If the thieves came in through the windows, what was their object in cutting that hole through the roof? The marks are very plain and they indicate that the hole was cut in some manner from the inside."

Dr. Bird smiled enigmatically.

"That is too evident for discussion," he replied. "I grant you that the thieves entered from the roof through that hole. After they had secured their booty they left by the same route. I presume that you have noticed the marks on the roof where an aircraft of some sort, probably a helicopter, landed and took off. A question of much greater moment is that of what they did before they landed and cut the hole."

"I don't follow your reasoning, Doctor."

"Carnes, that hole was cut through the roof with a heavy saw. In cutting it, the workers dislodged quite a little plaster which fell to the floor and must have made a great deal of noise. Why wasn't that noise heard?"

"It was heard. The watchman heard it, but knew that Lieutenant Breslau was working here and he thought that he made the noise."

"Surely, but why didn't Breslau hear it?"

"How do we know that he didn't? He was taken to Walter Reed Hospital this morning with his mind an absolute blank and with his tongue paralyzed. He must have seen the thieves and they treated him in some way to ensure his silence. When he is able to talk, if he ever is, he'll probably give us a good description of them."

DR. BIRD shook his head.

"Too thin, Carney, old dear," he said. "Breslau is a very intelligent young man. He was perfectly normal when I left him shortly after midnight last night. He was working alone in here on a device of the utmost military importance. On the desk is a push button which sets ringing a dozen gongs in the building. Surely a man of that type would have had sense enough when he heard and saw intruders cutting a hole through the roof to sound an alarm which would have brought every watchman on the grounds to his assistance. He must have been knocked out before the hole was started, probably before the helicopter's landing."

"How? Gas of some sort?"

"The windows were all closed and locked and I have already ascertained that the gas and water lines have not been tampered with. Gas won't penetrate through a solid roof in sufficient concentration to knock out a man like that. It was something more subtle than gas."

"What was it?"

"I don't know yet. The clue to what it was lies, as I told you, in those windows."

Carnes moved over and surveyed the windows closely.

"I see nothing unusual about them except that they need washing rather badly."

"They were washed last Friday, but they do look rather dirty, don't they? Suppose you take a rag and some scouring soap and clean up a pane."

The detective took the proffered articles and started his task. He wet a pane of glass, rubbed up a thick lather of scouring soap and applied it and rubbed vigorously. With clear water he washed the glass and then gave an exclamation of astonishment and examined it more closely.

"That isn't dirt, Doctor," he cried. "The glass seems to be fogged."

Dr. Bird chuckled.

"So it seems," he admitted. "Now look at the rest of the glass around the laboratory."

Carnes looked around and then walked to a table littered with apparatus and examined a dozen pieces carefully.

"It's all fogged in exactly the same way, Doctor," he said. "The only piece of clear glass in the room is that piece of plate glass on your desk."

DR. BIRD picked up a hammer and struck the plate on his desk a sharp blow. Carnes ducked instinctively, but the hammer rebounded harmlessly from the plate.

"That isn't glass, Carnes," said the doctor. "That plate is made of vitri-

lene, a new product which I have developed. It looks like glass, but it has entirely different properties. It is of enormous strength and is quite insensitive to shock. It has one most peculiar property. While ultra-violet and longer rays will penetrate it quite readily, it is a perfect screen for X-rays and other rays of shorter wave length. It appears to be the only piece of transparent substance in my laboratory which has not been fogged, as you call it."

"Do short waves fog glass, Doctor?"

"Not so far as I know at present, but you must remember that very little work has been done with the short wave-lengths. In the vast range of waves whose lengths lie between zero and that of the X-ray, only a few points have been investigated and definitely plotted. There may be in that range a wave-length which will fog glass."

"Then your theory is that some sort of a ray machine was put in operation before the helicopter landed?"

"It is too early to attempt any theorizing, Carnes. Let us confine ourselves to the known facts. Lieutenant Breslau was normal at midnight and was working in this room. Some time between then and seven this morning he underwent certain mental and physical changes which prevent him from telling us what he observed. During the same period, a hole was cut in the roof and things of great importance stolen. At the same time, all the glass in the laboratory became semi-opaque. The problem is to determine what connection there is between the three events. I will handle the scientific end here, but there is some outside work to be done, and that will be your share."

"GIVE your orders, Doctor," said the detective briefly.

"To understand what I am driving at, I will have to tell you what has been stolen. Naturally this is highly confidential. Some rumors have leaked out as to my experiments with 'radite,' as I have named the new radium-containing disintegrating explosive on which I have been working, but no one short of the Secretary of War and the Chief of Ordnance and certain of their selected subordinates knows that my experiments have been successful and that the United States is in a position to manufacture radite in almost unlimited quantities from the pitchblende ore deposits of Wyoming and Nevada. The effects of radite will be catastrophic on the unfortunate victim on whom it is first used. The only thing left to do was to develop a gun from which radite shells could be fired with safety and precision.

"Ordinary propellant powders are too variable for this purpose, but I found that radite B, one form of my new explosive, can be used for propelling the shells from a gun. The ordinary gun will last only two or three rounds, due to the erosive action of the radite charge on the barrel, and ordinary ordnance is heavier and more cumbersome than is necessary. When this was found to be the case, the Chief of Ordnance detailed Lieutenant Breslau, the army's greatest expert on gun design, to work with me in an attempt to develop a suitable weapon. Breslau is a wizard at that sort of work and he has made a miniature working model of a gun with a vitrilene-lined barrel which is capable of being fired with a miniature shell. The gun will stand up under the repeated firing of radite charges and is very light and compact and gives an accuracy of fire control heretofore deemed impossible. From this he planned to construct a larger weapon which would fire a shell containing an explosive charge of two and one-half ounces of radite at a rate of fire of two hundred shots per minute. The destructive effect of each shell will be greater than that of the ordinary high-explosive shell fired from a sixteen-inch mortar, and all of the shells can be landed inside a two-hundred foot circle at a range of fifteen miles. The weight of the com-

pleted gun will be less than half a ton, exclusive of the firing platform. It is Breslau's working model which has been stolen."

CARNES whistled softly between his teeth.

"The matter will have to be handled pretty delicately to avoid international complications," he said. "It's hard to tell just where to look. There are a great many nations who would give any amount for a model of such a weapon."

"The matter must be handled delicately and also in absolute secrecy, Carnes. We are not yet ready to announce to the world the fact that we have such a weapon in our armory. It is the plan of the President to have a half dozen of these weapons manufactured and give a demonstration of their terrible effectiveness to representatives of the powers of the world. Think what an argument the existence of such a weapon will be for the furtherence of his plans for disarmament and universal peace! Public sentiment will force disarmament on the world, for even the worst jingoist could no longer defend armaments in the face of America's offer to scrap these super-engines of destruction and to destroy the plans from which they were made. If the model has fallen into the hands of any civilized power the damage is not irreparable, for public opinion would force its surrender and return. It is among the uncivilized powers that our search must first be made."

"That makes the problem of where to start more complicated."

"On the contrary, it simplifies it immensely. At the head of the uncivilized powers stands one which has the brains, the scientific knowledge and the manufacturing facilities to make terrible use of such a weapon. In addition, the aim of that power is to overthrow all world governments and set up in their stead its own tyrannical disorder. Need I name it?"

"You refer to Russia."

"Not to Russia, the great slumbering giant who will some day take her place in the sun in fellowship with the other nations, but to Bolsheviki, that empire within an empire, that horrible power which is holding sleeping Russia in chains of steel and blood. It is there that our search must first be made."

"OF course, they have no official representative in America."

"No, but the Young Labor Party is as much their accredited representative as the British Ambassador is of imperial Britain. Your first task will be to trail down and locate every leader of that group and to investigate his present activities."

"I can tell you where most of them are without investigation. Denberg, Semensky and Karuska are in Atlanta; Fedorovitch and Caspar are in Leavenworth; Saranoff is dead—"

"Presumably."

"Why, Doctor, I saw with my own eyes the destruction of the submarine in which he was riding!"

"Did you see his dead body?"

"No."

"Neither did I, and I will never be sure until I do. Once before we were certain of his death, and he bobbed up with a new fiendish device. We cannot eliminate Saranoff."

"I will include him in my plans."

"Do so. Besides a hypothetical Saranoff, there are a half dozen or more of the old leaders of the gang who are alive and at liberty, so far as we know. They fled the country after the Coast Guard broke up their alien smuggling scheme, but some of them may have returned. There are also thirty or forty underlings who should be located and checked up on, and, in addition, we must not lose sight of the fact that new heads of the organization may have been smuggled into the United States. It is no simple task that I am setting you, Carnes, but I know that you and Bolton will see it through if anyone can."

"Thanks, Doctor, we'll do our best.

If I am not speaking out of turn, what are you planning to do in the mean time?"

"I AM going to start Taylor off on an ultra-short wave generator and try a few experiments along that line. Breslau is at Walter Reed and they are doing all they can for him, but until I can get some definite information as to the underlying cause of his condition, they are more or less shooting in the dark."

"How are they treating him?"

"By electric stimulations and vibratory treatments and by keeping him in a darkened room. By the way, Carnes, if I am correct in my line of thought, it would be well to have an extra guard put over Karuska. He was the only real expert in ordnance that the Young Labor party had, and if they have Breslau's model they'll need him to supervise the construction of a gun."

"I'll attend to that at once, Doctor. Is there anything else?"

"Not that I know of. I am going out to Takoma Park this afternoon and have another look at Breslau, but it is too soon to hope for any change in his condition. Aside from the time I will be out there, you can find me either here or at my home, in case anything develops."

"I'll get on the job at once, Doctor."

"Thanks, old dear. Remember that speed must be the keynote of your work."

THE telephone bell at the head of Dr. Bird's bed woke into noisy activity. The doctor roused himself and took down the instrument sleepily. A glance at the clock showed him that it was four in the morning and he muttered a malediction on the one who had called him.

"Hello," he said into the receiver. "Dr. Bird speaking."

"Doctor," came a crisp voice over the wire, "wake up! This is Carnes talking. Something has broken loose!"

All trace of sleep vanished from Dr. Bird's face and his eyes glowed momentarily with a peculiar glitter which Carnes would at once have recognized as indicative of the keenest interest.

"What has happened, Carnes?" he demanded.

"I telephoned Atlanta this morning and arranged to have an extra guard put over Karuska as you suggested. The matter was simplified by the fact that he and nine others were confined in the prison infirmary. The warden agreed to do as I told him, and, in addition to the regular guards, a special man was placed in the ward near Karuska's bed. At 2 A. M. the lights in the ward went out."

"Accidentally, or were they put out?"

"They haven't found out yet. At any rate they are all right now, but Karuska and all of the other inmates and all the guards of that particular ward have gone crazy."

"The dickens you say!"

"Not only that, they are also partially paralyzed. The description I got over the telephone corresponds exactly with the condition of Lieutenant Breslau as you described it to me. Here is the most interesting part of the whole affair. The special guard over Karuska was only lightly affected and has already recovered and is in a position to tell you exactly what happened. I got a garbled account of the affair from the warden, something about a goldfish bowl or something like that, the warden wouldn't take it seriously enough to give me details. I didn't press for them much for I knew that you would rather get them at first hand."

"I certainly would. I'll be ready to leave for Atlanta in less than ten minutes."

"I expected that, Doctor, and a car is already on its way to pick you up. I'll meet you at Langley Field where a plane is already being tuned up and will be ready to take off by the time we get there."

"Good work, Carnes. I'll see you at the field."

A CAR was waiting for Carnes and Dr. Bird when the Langley Field plane slid down to a landing at Atlanta. At the penitentiary, Dr. Bird went direct to the infirmary where Karuska had been confined. As he entered, he shot a keen glance around and gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Look at the windows, Carnes," he cried.

Carnes went over to the nearest window and moistened his finger tip and applied it experimentally to the glass. The moisture produced no effect, for the glass of the windows was permanently clouded as was that of the doctor's laboratory.

"Whatever happened in my laboratory the night before last was repeated here last night with a similar object," said the doctor. "The object there was to steal a gun model; here it was to steal a man who could construct a full-sized gun from the model. I understand that one of the guards escaped the fate which overtook the rest of the persons in the infirmary?"

"Not altogether, Doctor," replied the warden. "I think that his mind is somewhat affected, for he tells a wild yarn and insists on trying to wear a goldfish bowl on his head. I have him under observation in the psychopathic ward."

Dr. Bird shot a scornful glance at the warden.

"'There are none so blind as those who will not see'," he murmured.

"By all means, I wish to see him," he went on aloud. "Will you have him brought here at once, please?"

THE warden nodded and spoke to one of the attendants. In a few moments a tall, fair-haired young giant stood before the doctor. Dr. Bird pushed back his unruly shock of black hair with his fingers, those long slim mobile fingers which alone betrayed the artist in his make-up, and shot a piercing glance from his black eyes into the blue ones, which returned the gaze unabashed.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Bailley, sir."

"You were on guard here last night?"

"Yes, sir. I was detailed as a special guard over No. 9764."

"Tell me in your own words just what happened. Don't be afraid to speak out; I'm not going to disbelieve you; and above all, tell me everything, no matter how unimportant it may seem to you. I'll judge the importance of things for myself. I'm Dr. Bird of the Bureau of Standards."

The guard's face lighted up at the doctor's words.

"I've heard of you, Doctor," he said in a relieved tone, "and I'll be glad to tell you everything. At ten o'clock last night, I relieved Carragher as special guard over No. 9764. Carragher reported that the prisoner was somewhat restless and hadn't been asleep as yet. I sat down about fifteen feet from his bed and prepared to keep an eye on him until I was relieved at six o'clock this morning.

"Nothing happened until about two o'clock. No. 9764 was restless as Carragher had said, but toward midnight he quieted down and apparently went to sleep. I was sleepy myself, and I got up and took a turn around the room every five minutes to be sure that I kept awake. That's how I am so sure of the time, sir."

DR. BIRD nodded.

"At five minutes to two, just as I got up, I heard a noise outside like a big electric fan. It sounded like it came from directly overhead and I went to the window and looked out. I couldn't see anything, although I could hear it pretty plainly, and then I heard a noise like something had fallen on the roof. Almost at the same time there came a sort of high-pitched whine, a good deal like the noise an electric motor makes when it is running at high speed.

"I thought of giving an alarm, but I didn't want to stir things up unless I was sure that there was some necessity

for it, so I started for the door to ask one of the outside guards if he had heard anything. As I turned toward No. 9764 I saw that he had been sitting up in bed while my back was turned. As soon as he saw that I noticed him, he lay back real quick and pulled the covers over his head. He moved pretty quick, but not so quick that I couldn't see that he had something that glittered like glass before his face. I started over toward his bed to see what he was doing and then it was that the lights started to get dim!"

"Go on!" said the doctor as Bailley paused. His eyes were glittering brightly now.

"Well, sir, Doctor, I don't hardly know how to describe what happened next. The lights were getting dim, but not as they ordinarily do when the current starts to go off. The filaments were shining as bright as they ever did, but the light didn't seem to be able to penetrate the air. The whole room seemed to be filled with a blackness that stopped the light. No, sir, it wasn't like fog; it was more like something more powerful than the lights was in the room and was killing them.

"IT wasn't only the lights which were affected, it was me as well. This blackness, whatever it was, was getting into me as well as into the room, and I couldn't seem to make myself think like I wanted to. I tried to yell to give an alarm, and I found that I could hardly whisper. I went toward the bed and then I saw No. 9764 sit up again. He had a goldfish bowl pulled down over his head and it was evident that it was keeping the blackness away for I could see him plainly and his eyes were as bright as ever.

"The nearer I got to him, the funnier I felt, and I began to be afraid that I would go out. No. 9764 got up out of bed, and I could see him grinning at me through the bowl. He reached up and adjusted that bowl, and all of a sudden I realized that whatever was knocking me out was not affecting him because he had that thing on. I jumped for him with the idea of taking the bowl off and putting it on my own head. He saw what I was up to and he fought like a cornered rat, but the blackness hadn't affected my muscles. I'm a pretty big man, sir, and No. 9764 is a little runt, and it didn't take me long to get the bowl off his head and pulled on over mine. As soon as I did that, I seemed to be able to think clearer. I was sitting on No. 9764 and was ready to tap him with a persuader if he started anything, but I didn't have to. In a few minutes he stopped struggling and lay perfectly quiet.

"The lights kept getting dimmer and dimmer until they went out altogether and the room became pitch dark. It wasn't exactly as if the lights had gone out, sir; I seemed to know that they were still there and were burning as bright as ever, but they couldn't penetrate the blackness in the room, if you understand what I mean."

"I THINK I do," said Dr. Bird slowly. "It was a good deal as if you had seen a glass filled with a pale red liquid and someone had dumped black ink into the fluid and hid the red color. You would know that the red was still there, but you wouldn't be able to see it through the black."

"That's exactly what it was like, Doctor; you have described it better than I can. At any rate, after it got real dark I heard a low whistle from the roof. No. 9764 made a struggle to get up for a moment and then lay quiet again. The whistle sounded again and then I heard some one call 'Caruso.' Everything was quiet for a while and then the same voice called again and said some stuff in a foreign language that I couldn't understand. I kept perfectly quiet to see what would happen.

"For about ten minutes the room remained perfectly dark, as I have said, and all the while I could hear that whining noise. All of a sudden it began to sound in a lower note and then

I could see the lights again, very dimly and like the black ink you spoke of was fading out. The note got lower until it stopped altogether, and the lights came on brighter until they were normal again. Then I heard a scraping noise on the roof and the noise I had heard at first like a big electric fan. I looked at the clock. It was two-twenty.

"For a few minutes I wasn't able to collect my wits. When I got up off of No. 9764 at last he stared at me as though he didn't know a thing, and I heaved him back into his bed and ran to the door to summon an outside guard. I could still talk in a husky whisper, but not loud, and I wasn't surprised when no one heard me. My orders were not to let No. 9764 out of my sight, but this was an emergency, so I left the ward and found a guard. It was Madigan and he was standing on his beat staring at nothing. When I touched him he looked at me and there was the same vacant look in his eyes that I had seen in the prisoner's. I talked to him in a whisper, but he didn't seem to understand, so I left him and went to a telephone and called for help. Mr. Lawson, the warden, got here with guards in a couple of minutes and I tried to tell him what had happened, but I couldn't talk loud, and I was afraid to take the fish bowl off my head."

"WHAT happened next?"

"Mr. Lawson took me to his office, and on the way we passed under an arc light. As soon as I got under it I began to feel better, and my voice came stronger. I saw that it was doing me some good and I stopped under it for an hour before my voice got back to normal. It seemed to clear the fog from my brain, too, and I was able, about four o'clock, to tell everything that had happened. Mr. Lawson seemed to think that my brain was affected as well as the others' and he sent me to the hospital. That's all, Doctor."

"Do you feel perfectly normal now?"

"Yes, sir."

"There is no need for confining this man longer, Mr. Lawson. He is as well as he ever was. Carnes, get the Walter Reed Hospital on the telephone and tell them that I said to treat Lieutenant Breslau with light rays, rich in ultra-violet. Tell them to give him an overdose of them and not to put goggles on him. Keep him in the sun all day and under sun-ray arcs at night until further orders. Mr. Lawson, give the same treatment to the men who were disabled last night. If you haven't enough sun-ray arcs in your hospital, put them under an ordinary arc light in the yard. Bailley, have you still got that goldfish bowl?"

"It is in my office, Doctor," said the warden.

"Good enough! Send for it at once. By the way, you have two more communists here, Denberg and Semensky, haven't you?"

"I think so, although I will have to consult the records before I can be positive."

"I am sure that you have. Look the matter up and let me know."

THE warden hurried away to carry out the doctor's orders, and an orderly appeared in a few moments with a hollow globe made of some crystalline transparent substance. Despite its presence in the infirmary the evening before, there was no trace of clouding apparent. Dr. Bird took it and examined it critically. He rapped it with his knuckles and then stepped to the door and hurled it violently down on the concrete floor of the yard. The globe rebounded without injury and he caught it.

"Vitrilene, or a good imitation of it," he remarked to Carnes. "After you get through talking to the hospital, get Taylor on the wire. There is plenty of loose vitrilene in the Bureau, and I want him to send down about fifty square feet of it by a special plane at once."

As Carnes left the room, the warden reappeared.

"The men are all lying in the sun now, Doctor," he said. "I find that we have the two men you mentioned confined here. They are both in Tier A, Building 6."

"Is that an isolated building?"

"No, it is one wing of the old main building."

"On which floor?"

"The second floor. It is a six-story building."

"Have they been moved there recently?"

"They have been there for nearly a year."

"IN that case there will be little chance of another attack of this sort to-night. At the same time, I would advise you to station extra guards there to-night and every night until I notify you otherwise. Caution them to watch the lights carefully and to give an alarm at once if they appear to get dim. In such a case, send men to the roof with rifles with orders to shoot to kill anyone they find there. I am going back to Washington and I am going to take Karuska, your No. 9764 with me. You had better have one of the guards in the corridor, where Denberg and Semensky are, wear this goldfish bowl, as you call it. A lot of plate glass—at least it will look like that—will come from Washington by plane. Cut it into sheets a foot square and use surgeon's plaster to make some temporary glass helmets for your men. I want all your guards to wear them until I either settle this matter or else send you some better helmets. Do you understand?"

"I understand all right, but I'm afraid that I can't do it. The wearing of such appliances would interfere with the efficiency of my men as guards."

"Brain and tongue paralysis would interfere rather more seriously, it seems to me. In any event, I have sufficient authority to enforce my request. If you are at all doubtful, call up the Attorney General and ask him."

The warden hesitated.

"If you don't mind, I think I will call Washington, Doctor," he said. "I will have to get authority to turn No. 9764 over to you in any event."

"Call all you wish, Mr. Lawson. Mr. Carnes is talking to Washington now and we'll have a clear line through for you in a few minutes. Meanwhile, get a set of shackles on Karuska and get him ready to travel by plane. He appears to be suffering from mental paralysis, but I don't know how his case will develope. He may go violently insane at any moment and I don't care to be aloft in a plane with an unbound maniac."

MAJOR MARTIN looked up from the prone figure of Karuska.

"His condition duplicates that of Lieutenant Breslau, Dr. Bird," he said. "We received your telephoned message this afternoon and we kept Breslau in a flood of sunlight until dusk, and then put him under sun-ray lamps. I don't know how you got on to that treatment, but it is having a very beneficial effect. He can already make inarticulate sounds, and his eyes are not quite as vacant as they were. If he keeps on improving as he has, he should be able to talk intelligently in a few days. If you wish to question this man, why not give him the same treatment?"

"I haven't time, Major. I must make him talk to-night if it is humanly possible. I called you in because you are the most eminent authority on the brain in the government service. Is there any way of artificially stimulating this man's brain so that we can force the secrets of his subconscious mind from him?"

The major sat for a moment in profound thought.

"There *is* a way, Doctor," he said at length, "but it is a method which I would not dare to use. By applying high frequency electrical stimulations to the medulla oblongata, at the same time bathing the cerebellum with ultra-violet, it might be done, but the

chances are that either death or insanity would result. I would not do it."

"Major Martin, this man is a reckless and dangerous international criminal. If his gang carries out the plan which I fear they have formed, the lives of thousands, yes, of millions, may pay for your hesitation. I will assume full responsibility for the test if you will make it, and I have the authority of the President of the United States behind me."

"In that case, Doctor, I have no choice. The President is the Commander-in-chief of the army, and if those are his orders the experiment will be carried out. As a matter of form, I will ask that your orders be reduced to writing."

"I will write them gladly, Major. Please proceed with the experiment without delay."

MAJOR MARTIN bowed and spoke to a waiting orderly. The prostrate figure of Karuska was wheeled down a corridor into the electrical laboratory, and with the aid of the laboratory technician the surgeon made his preparations. The Moss lamp was arranged to throw a flood of ultra-violet over the Russian's cranium while the leads from a deep therapy X-ray tube was connected, one to the front of Karuska's throat and the other to the base of his brain. At a signal from the major, a nurse began to administer ether.

"I guarantee nothing, Dr. Bird," said the major. "The paralysis of the vocal chords may be physical, in which case the victim will still be unable to speak, regardless of the brain stimulation. If, however, the evident paralysis is due to some obscure influence on the brain, it may work."

"In any event I will hold you blameless and thank you for your help," replied the doctor. "Please start the stimulation."

Major Martin closed a switch, and the hum of a high tension alternator filled the laboratory. The Russian quivered for a moment and then lay still. Major Martin nodded and Dr. Bird stepped to the side of the operating table.

"Ivan Karuska," he said slowly and distinctly, "do you hear me?"

The Russian's lips quivered and an unintelligible murmur came from them.

"Ivan Karuska," repeated Dr. Bird, "do you hear me?"

THERE was a momentary struggle on the part of the Russian and then a surprisingly clear voice came from his lips.

"I do."

"Who is the present head of the Young Labor party?"

Again there was a pause before the name "Saranoff" came from the lips of the insensible figure. Carnes gave a sharp exclamation but a gesture from the doctor silenced him.

"Is Saranoff alive?"

"Yes."

"Is he in the United States?"

"No, he is in London."

"Is he coming to the United States?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know. Soon. As soon as we are ready for him."

"Where is he living in London?"

"I don't know."

"How did you get word that you were to be rescued from Atlanta?"

"A message was smuggled in to me by O'Grady, a guard in our pay."

"What was that vitrilene helmet for?"

"To protect me from the effects of the black lamp."

"What is the black lamp?"

"I don't know exactly. Saranoff invented it. It gives a black light and it kills all other light except sunlight, and it paralyzes the brain."

"Did you know that the model of the Breslau gun had been stolen?"

"Yes."

"What were you going to do after you were rescued from jail?"

"I was going to make a full-sized

gun. We have a disappearing gun platform built in the swamps at the juncture of the Potomac and Piscataway Creek. The gun was to be mounted there and we would shell Washington and institute a reign of terror. It would be a signal for uprisings all over the country."

"Is there a black lamp at the gun platform?"

"Yes. The black lamp will kill both the flash and the report."

"Where did you get the formula for radite?"

"We got it from one of Dr. Bird's assistants. His name—"

AS he spoke the last few sentences, Karuska's voice had steadily risen almost to a shriek. As he endeavored to give the name of the doctor's treacherous helper his voice changed to an unintelligible screech and then died away into silence. Major Martin stepped forward and bent over the prone figure. Hurriedly he tore away the electrical connections and placed a stethoscope over the Russian's heart. He listened for a moment and then straightened up, his face pale.

"I hope that the information you obtained is worth a life, Dr. Bird," he said, his voice trembling slightly, "because it has cost one."

"It may easily save thousands of lives. I thank you, Major, and I will see that no blame attaches to you for your actions. I only wish that he had lived long enough to tell me the name of my assistant who has sold me to Saranoff. However, we'll get that information in other ways. Carnes, telephone Lawson at Atlanta to slam O'Grady into a cell pending investigation while I get Camp Meade on the wire and order up a couple of tanks. We are going to attack that gun emplacement at daybreak."

The telephone bell in the laboratory jangled sharply. Major Martin answered it and turned to Carnes.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Mr. Carnes."

The detective stepped forward and took the transmitter.

"Carnes speaking," he said. "Yes. Oh, hello, Bolton. Yes, we have Karuska here, or rather his body. Yes, Dr. Bird is here right now. You've what? Great Scott, wait a minute."

"Dr. Bird," he cried eagerly turning from the telephone, "Bolton has located the Washington headquarters of the Young Labor party."

Dr. Bird sprang to the instrument.

"Bird speaking, Bolton," he cried. "You've located their headquarters? Who's running it? Stanesky, eh? You're on the right track; he used to be Saranoff's right hand man. Where is the place located? I don't seem to recollect the spot. You have it well surrounded? Where are you speaking from? All right, we'll join you as quickly as we can. Keep your patrols out and don't let anyone get away."

He hung up the receiver and turned to Carnes.

"Did you have the car wait?" he asked. "Good enough; we'll jump for the Bureau and pick up all the vitrilene laying around loose and then join Bolton. He thinks that he has the whole outfit bottled up."

BOLTON was waiting as the car rolled up and Dr. Bird leaped out.

"Where are they?" demanded the doctor eagerly.

"In an abandoned factory building about three hundred yards from here," replied the Chief of the Secret Service. "I traced them through New York. We have been watching the place ever since yesterday noon, and I know that Stanesky is in there with half a dozen others. No one has tried to leave since we set our watch. One funny thing has happened. About an hour ago a peculiar red glow suffused the whole building. It has died down a good deal since, but we can still see it through the windows. Could you tell us what it means?"

"No, I couldn't, Bolton, but we'll find out. How many men have you?"

"I have sixteen stationed around."

"That's more than we'll need. I have only vitrilene shields and helmets enough to equip six men. Pick out your three best men to go with us and we'll make a try at entering."

Bolton strode off into the darkness and returned in a few moments with three men at his heels. Dr. Bird spoke briefly to the operatives, all of them men who had been his companions on other adventures. He explained the need for the vitrilene helmets and shields, and without comment the six donned their armor and followed Bolton as he strode toward the building. As they approached, a dull red glow could be plainly seen through the windows, and Dr. Bird paused and studied the phenomenon for a moment.

"I don't know what that means, Bolton," he said softly, "but I don't like the looks of it. Stanesky is up to some devilment or other. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to find out that he knows all about your pickets and is ready for a raid."

"We'd better rush the place, then," muttered Bolton.

DR. BIRD nodded agreement and with a sharp command to his men Bolton broke into a run. Not a shot was fired as they approached, and the front door gave readily to Bolton's touch. As it opened there came a grating sound from the roof followed by the whir of a propeller. Dr. Bird ran out of the building and glanced up.

"A helicopter!" he cried. "They were expecting us and have escaped!"

He drew his pistol and fired ineffectually at the great bird-like ship which was rising almost noiselessly into the air. He cursed and turned again to the building.

Bolton still stood in the room which they had first entered. His flash-light showed it to be empty, but from under a door on the opposite side a line of dull red light glowed evilly. With his pistol ready in his hand, Bolton approached the door on hands and knees. When he reached it he threw his shoulder against it and dropped flat to the floor as the door swung open. No shot greeted him, and he stared for a moment and then rose to his feet.

"Nothing in here but some glass statues," he announced.

Dr. Bird followed him into the room. As he looked at what Bolton had called glass statues he gasped and shielded his eyes.

"God in Heaven!" he ejaculated. "Those were living men!"

BEFORE them were three men or what had been three men. All stood in strained attitudes with a look of horror frozen on their faces. The thing that made the spectators shudder was that their bodies had, by some diabolical method, been rendered semi-transparent. The dull red light which suffused the room emanated from the three bodies. Dr. Bird examined them closely, being careful not to touch them.

"The identity of my treacherous assistant is known," he said grimly as he pointed at the middle figure. "It was Gerond. What is this?"

He took an envelope from the hand of the middle figure and opened it. A sheet of paper fell out and he picked it up and read it.

"My dear Mr. Bolton," ran the note. "Your methods of tracing and picketing my headquarters are so crude as to be almost laughable. This base has served its purpose and we were ready to abandon it in any event, but I couldn't resist the temptation to let you almost nab us. The three men whom you will find here are agents who failed in their duty. If you are interested in learning the method of their execution, you might take to heart the words of your colleague, Dr. Bird: 'The clue lies in those windows.'"

Carnes glanced at the windows and gave a cry of surprise. The glass was opaque, as had been the glass in the doctor's laboratory and the glass in the infirmary at Atlanta. The fogging,

however, was much more pronounced, and the opaque glass gave faintly the same red effulgence which came from the three bodies.

"What does it mean, Doctor?" he asked.

"I don't know, Carnes," said Dr. Bird slowly. "I foresee that I am going to have to do a great deal of work on short wave-lengths soon. It is doubtless the effect of some modification of the black lamp which has done it. Look out!"

HE leaped to one side as he spoke, drawing Bolton and Carnes with him. A panel in the side of the wall opposite the doorway had slid silently open and through the opening poured out a beam of fiery red. Full on the three bodies it fell, and then spread out to fill the room. Dr. Bird had drawn the two nearest men out of the direct beam, but one of the secret service men stood full in its path. In the excitment of entering he had dropped his vitrilene shield and the livid ray fell full on his defenceless body. As they watched an expression of horror spread over his face and he strove to move to one side, but he was held helpless. Slowly he stiffened; and, as the ray bored through him, his body became semi-transparent and the same dull red glow which emanated from the three bodies they had found began to shine forth from him. Bolton strove to break from the doctor's grasp and rush to the rescue but Dr. Bird held him with a grip of iron.

"Too late," he said grimly. "Chalk up another murder to the arch fiend who has committed the others. I don't know the nature of that ray and vitrilene may not be an adequate defence against its full force. We had better get out of here and attack the place from the rear."

Carefully edging their way around the sides of the room, the five men made their way out through the door. Dr. Bird slammed the door shut behind him and led the way out of the building and around to the rear. A door loomed before them and he cautiously tried it. It gave to his touch and he entered. As he set his foot on the threshold a terrific explosion came from the interior of the building.

"Run!" he shouted as he led the way in retreat. "If that is a radite explosion it will act for several seconds!"

From a safe distance they watched. One corner of the building had been torn off by the force of the explosion, and as they watched the rest of the building gradually collapsed and sank into a pile of ruins.

"They had planned on a visit from us all right," said Dr. Bolton grimly. "They had a surprise for us any way we jumped. If we went in the front door, that devil's ray was to finish us, and if we went in the back door the whole place was arranged to blow up as we entered. I only hope that Stanesky thinks that he has got us all and doesn't expect an attack on his next base in the morning. If he doesn't, I think we may give him a rather unpleasant surprise. Of course, that lamp is smashed into atoms and buried under the debris, but I don't know what other devil's contraptions that ruin holds. Bolton, have your men picket it and allow no one near until I get back. I've got to get to a telephone and get a couple of tanks from Meade and a plane or two from Langley Field."

TWO tanks made their way slowly across country. The front of each tank was protected by a heavy sheet of vitrilene, while from the turrets of the tanks projected the wicked looking muzzles of thirty-seven millimeter guns. Overhead two airplanes from Langley Field soared, scouting the country. Dr. Bird and Carnes rode in the leading tank.

"It ought to be somewhere near here, unless Karuska lied," said Carnes as he swept the country with a pair of binoculars.

"He didn't lie," returned Dr. Bird.

"It was his subconscious mind that spoke and it never lies. He spoke of the gun emplacement as being in a swamp and I have a strong idea that it is submersible. Of course, it is bound to be well camouflaged, both from land and from air observation."

The planes circled around again and again, quartering the air like a pair of well-trained bird dogs will quarter a hunting field. First high and then low they swooped back and forth, the tanks lumbering slowly along in the same direction. Presently the occupants of the leading tank saw one of the planes bank sharply and swing around. It dropped to an altitude of only a few hundred feet and turned and went back over the ground it had just crossed.

"I believe that fellow sees something!" exclaimed Carnes.

As he spoke, three green Very lights came from the cockpit of the plane. The tank driver gave a grunt of satisfaction and turned the nose of his vehicle in that direction. The second tank followed.

Hardly had they turned in the new direction before the ground began to get soft under their tracks and the heavy vehicles began to sink. The driver of the Doctor's tank forced it ahead, but the tank sank deeper in the mire until water flowed in around the feet of the occupants.

"I reckon we'll have to get out and walk pretty soon, Doctor," said the driver.

DR. BIRD grunted in acquiescence. The tank made its way forward a few yards before the engine sputtered and died. The second tank stopped when the first one did, fifty yards behind it. Donning vitrilene helmets and taking vitrilene shields in their hands, the crews of both tanks climbed out into the waist-deep water and gathered around the Doctor for orders.

"Form a skirmish line at ten-pace intervals and cross the swamp," he directed. "We may meet with no opposition, but if there is, the more scattered we are, the safer we will be. You all have hand grenades as well as your rifles?"

A murmur of assent answered him and the line formed and started across the swamp. They had gone perhaps a hundred yards when three red lights came from one of the planes circling overhead.

"Down!" cried the doctor, dropping to his knees in the muck.

Four hundred yards ahead of them a concrete platform emerged from the marsh and rose slowly into the air. It was roofed with a dome of what looked like plate glass, but which the doctor shrewdly suspected was vitrilene. When the base of the platform was two feet above the level of the water the dome slid silently aside disclosing two men bending over a tiny gun. Dr. Bird leveled his binoculars.

"That's the Breslau gun model that was stolen as sure as I'm a foot high!" he cried. "They must have made some miniature shells and be planning to fire it."

Slowly a pall of intense blackness rose from the marsh and enveloped the platform and hid it from view. A whining noise came from overhead, and then a crash like a thunderbolt. The blast of the explosion threw the attackers face down in the swamp, and when they arose and looked back there was merely a gaping hole where the leading tank had been. The second tank suddenly seemed to rise in the air and fly into millions of tiny fragments, and a second thunderous blast sent them again to their knees.

"Radite!" bellowed Dr. Bird to Carnes. "Imagine the effect if that had been a full charge fired from a completed Breslau gun! Watch the planes, now. I think they are going to drop a few eggs on them."

THE black mist cleared as if by magic and the platform was in plain view. The big glass dome rolled back into place as the two planes swept

over at an elevation of two thousand feet. From each one a small black cigar-shaped object was released and fell in a long parabola toward the earth. The glass dome which had been closing over the gun platform rolled quickly back and a long beam of intense blackness pierced the heavens. First one and then the other of the falling bombs disappeared from view into it, and then the black column faded from view. The two bombs fell with increasing speed but the dome closed over the platform before they struck. The two hit the dome at almost the same instant and instead of the blinding crash they expected, the watchers saw the bombs rebound from the dome and fall harmlessly into the water.

"Stymied!" muttered the doctor. "I wonder what other properties that confounded lamp has."

He resumed his advance, Carnes and the soldiers keeping abreast of him. When they were within two hundred yards of the platform it rose again and the transparent dome rolled back. A beam of black shot forth over the swamp, searching them out and hiding them from view. First one and then another felt the effects of the black beam; but the vitrilene which the Doctor had provided stood them in good stead, and, aside from a slight shortening of their breath, none of the attackers felt any the worse.

"Come on, men!" cried the Doctor as his athletic figure plowed forward through the breast-deep water. "That is their worst weapon and it is harmless against us!"

Cheering, they fought their way toward the platform. It sunk for a moment and then rose again. As the dome swung back a sharp crackle of machine-gun fire sounded and the water before them was whipped into foam by the plunging bullets. One of the soldiers gave a sharp cry and slumped forward into the water.

"Fire at will!" shouted the lieutenant in command.

A CRACKLE of rifle fire answered the tattoo of the machine-gun, and the sharp ping of bullets striking on the dome could be plainly heard. An occasional shot kicked up a spurt of white dust from the concrete, but the machine-gun kept up a steady rattle of fire and the soldiers kept their heads almost at the level of the water. There came the roar of an airplane motor, and one of the planes swept over the platform, a hundred yards in the air, with two machine-guns spraying streams of bullets onto the platform. Two men abandoned their machine-gun and crouched under the partially folded-back dome as the second plane swept over, and Dr. Bird took advantage of the lull to advance his party a few yards nearer. Again the defenders of the platform rushed to their gun, but the first plane had turned and swooped down with both guns going, and again they were forced to take shelter while the Doctor and his force made another advance.

The second plane had turned and followed the first, but the defenders had had enough. The transparent dome closed over them and the platform sank into the marsh. With a shout, Dr. Bird led the way forward again.

The attackers were within a hundred yards of the platform when it again rose above the surface of the water. The guns had disappeared, but in their place stood an airship. It was a small affair with stubby wings above which were two helicopter blades revolving at high speed. No sound of a motor could be heard.

The transparent dome rolled back and like a bullet the little craft shot into the air, followed by a futile volley from the soldiers. Hardly had it appeared than the two airplanes bore down on it with machine-guns going. The helicopter paid no attention to them for a moment, and then came a puff of smoke from its side. The leading plane swerved sharply and the helicopter fired again. The leading

plane maneuvered about, trying to get a machine-gun to bear, while the second plane climbed swiftly to get above the helicopter and pour a deadly stream of fire down into it. It gained position and swooped down to the attack, but another puff of smoke came from the side of the helicopter and there was a thunderous report and a blinding flash in the sky. As the smoke cleared away, no trace of the ill-fated plane could be seen. The helicopter hung motionless in the air as though daring the remaining plane to attack.

THE plane accepted the challenge and bore down at full speed on the stranger. Again came a puff of smoke, but the plane swerved and an answering shot came from its side. It was above the helicopter, and the shell which missed its mark plunged to the ground. When it struck there came a roar and a flash and the whole earth seemed to shake. The helicopter shot upward into the air and forward, both its elevating fans and its propellers whirling blurs of light. The airplane followed at its sharpest climbing angle, but was helpless to compete with its swifter climbing rival.

"He's got away!" groaned Carnes.

"Not yet, old dear!" cried the Doctor hopping with excitement. "He isn't safe yet. I never told you, but one Breslau gun had been made and it is on that plane. It has deadly accuracy and is good for fifteen miles. That's Lieutenant Dreen at the controls and Mason at the gun."

As he spoke the plane swung around and made a half loop. For a few yards it flew upside down and then whirled swiftly. As it turned there came a sharp report and a puff of smoke from its rear cockpit. High above, the helicopter had ceased climbing and hovered motionless. As the plane fired, the helicopter shot forward like an arrow from a bow, and thereby spelled its doom. Not for nothing did Captain Mason bear the title of the best aerial gunner in the Air Corps. He had foreseen what the action of his opponent would be and had allowed for just such a move. Far up in the sky came a blinding flash and a cloud of smoke. When the smoke cleared the sky was empty, except for a little scattered débris falling slowly to the ground.

"AND that's that!" exclaimed Dr. Bird as he finished his examination of the underground laboratory with which the gun platform connected. "The lamp has gone to glory with Breslau's gun model and two of the best brains of the Young Labor party. I am sure that Stanesky was one of those two men. I wish the whole gang had been on board."

"Don't you think that this is the end of it, Doctor?" asked Carnes.

"No, Carnes, I don't. We know that the real brains of this outfit is Saranoff, and Saranoff is still alive. He probably won't try to use his black lamp again, because I will have a defence against it in a short time, now that I have seen it in action, but he'll try something else. The whole object of life to a loyal citizen of Bolshevikia is to reduce the whole world to the barbarous level in which they hold Russia, and they will spare no pains or effort to accomplish it. The greatest obstacle to their success at present is the President of the United States. He is loved and respected by the whole world, and if he is spared he will forge the world into a great machine for the preservation of peace and universal good will. That would be fatal to Bolshevikia's plans, and they will spare no effort to remove him. By the grace of God, we have saved him from harm so far, but until we remove Saranoff permanently from the scene, I will never feel safe for him."

"What do you suppose they'll try next, Doctor?"

"That, Carnes, time alone will tell."

Agile as grasshoppers, those fierce war dogs ripped and worried their prey.

Phalanxes of Atlans

BEGINNING A TWO-PART NOVEL

By F. V. W. Mason

CHAPTER I

THE ice suddenly gave way under his foot, hurling Victor Nelson violently forward to lie in the deep snow at the bottom of a tiny crevasse, down which the merciless gale moaned like an anguished demon.

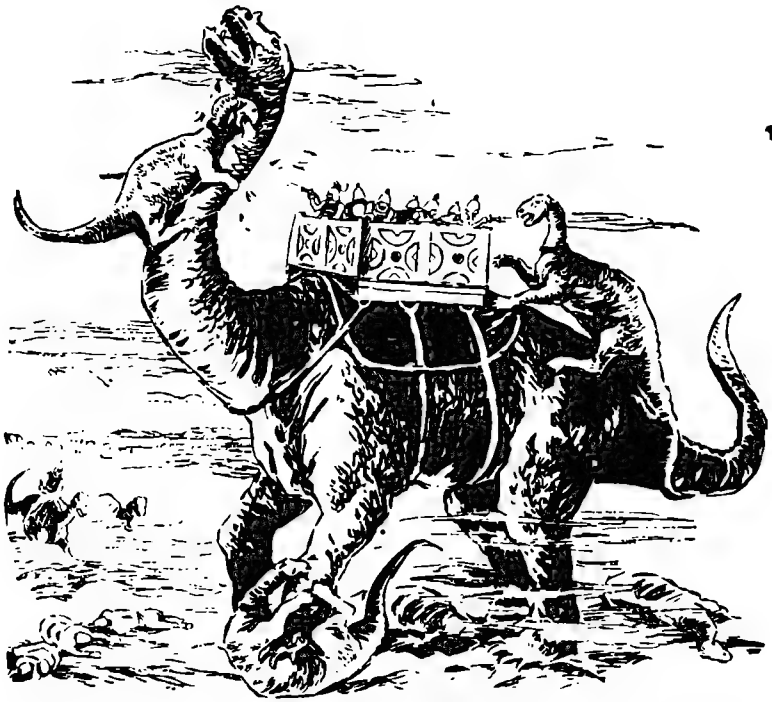
"It's no use," he muttered bitterly. "We've fought hard, but we're done for."

He lay still, stupidly watching his breath form tiny beads of ice on the ends of the fur which lined his parka. Until that moment he had not realized how thoroughly exhausted he was. Every muscle of his starved, bruised body ached unbearably. It wasn't so bad lying there in the soft snow. He could rest, then look later for the ice hummock behind which the plane lay sheltered. Rest! That's what he needed, a good long rest.

Only in dim legends did mankind remember Atlantis and the Lost Tribes—until Victor Nelson's extraordinary adventure in the unknown arctic.

But deep within him, a primal instinct stabbed his waning consciousness. "No," he gasped, and blinked his reddened eyes behind smoked goggles which dulled the shimmer of the aurora. "If I stop, I'll never get up."

Shaken by the terrific velocity of the arctic gale he numbly clambered to his feet, then stooped with a stiff, awk-



ward motion to retrieve a Winchester rifle which lay half buried in the snow beside the blurred imprint of his body.

"Wonder if Alden had any better luck?" The question burned dully in his brain. "Don't suppose so; there can't be anything alive in this God-awful wilderness." As he stumbled on he found no answer in an unbroken vista of wind-scored ice and drifting snow that, swirling high into the air, momentarily cut off the view of that black line of ice-capped mountains barely visible on the horizon.

"Yes, if he hasn't found anything, we'll be dead or frozen stiff before tomorrow."

HIS soul—that of a true explorer—revolted, not at the thought of death, but that his and Alden's courageously won discovery of a majestic mountain range towering high over a polar region marked "unexplored" on the maps would now never be made public.

Leaning forward against the merciless icy blast he painfully picked his way over a treacherous ice ridge, to be faintly encouraged by the fact that the towerlike hummock of ice marking the position of the plane now lay but a few hundred yards ahead.

Bitterly he cursed that demon of ill-fortune who had sent the blinding snow storm which had forced down the plane ten long days ago at the very beginning of its triumphant return flight to the base at Cape Richards. Since that hour the storm gods had emptied the vials of their wrath upon the luckless explorers. Day after day, cyclonic winds made all thought of a take-off suicidal in the extreme. Three days

ago the last of their food had given out, and, he mused, starvation is an ill companion for despair.

Slip, slide and fall! On he fought until the final barrier was reached and he stood staring hopelessly down into a small natural amphitheater which sheltered the great monoplane. The ship was still there, its engine snugged in a canvas shroud and with the soft, dry snow banked up high in the lee of its silver gray fuselage. Numbly, like a man in the grip of a painful coma, Nelson shielded his face with a furry hand to scan the surrounding terrain. "Hell!" The door block of the igloo they had built was still snowed up; Alden was not there!

"He's not back," he muttered, while his body swayed beneath the gale which smote him with fierce, unseen fists. "Poor devil, I hope he hasn't lost the way."

All the bitterness of undeserved defeat stung his soul as he started down the incline into the hollow.

SUDDENLY he paused. The rifle flew into the ready position and his chilled thumb drew back the hammer. "What's this?" On the snow at his feet was a bright, scarlet splash, dreadfully distinct against the white background. While his dazed brain struggled to register what his eyes saw, he looked to the right and left and discovered several more of the hideous spots. Then an object that gleamed dully in the polar twilight attracted his attention. He lumbered forward, stooped stiffly and caught up a long, half round strip of bronze.

"What? Why? Oh—I'm crazy, I'm seeing things!" The pain in his empty stomach was now becoming excruciating. To steady himself he shut his eyes, shook his head as though to clear it, then looked again at that strip of metal in his hand. Attached to it were two slender strips of leather like straps, ending in small, bronze buckles.

"Why, it's not from the plane," he stammered aloud. "Damned if it doesn't look like a greave the old Greek warriors used to wear to protect their shins."

Suddenly alarmed and mystified beyond words, he shuffled forward over the snow, the greave yet clutched in a fur gloved hand. Presently two more objects, already half buried by the stinging, swirling drifts, caught his attention. One was the stock of Alden's rifle, protruding starkly brown from the unrelieved whiteness, and the other was a broken wooden shaft that ended a graceful but wickedly sharp bronze spear head.

"I've either gone crazy," he said, "or I'm delirious. Yes, I must be clean nutty! There *couldn't* be a human settlement within a thousand miles. Let's see what's happened."

ON the snow of a little wind-sheltered space behind the igloo he discovered the unmistakable and ominous signs of a struggle. An indefinite number of footprints, blurred but enormous in size, were marked in the snow. Here and there deep furrows mutely testified how Alden and the enemies against whom he struggled had reeled back and forth in vicious combat over a considerable area. Then, shaken by a new fear, he discovered Alden's left glove and a rag of some peculiar thick material that seemed to have a metallic finish. But what aroused his gravest fears were the numerous splashes of blood that here and there streaked the snow in gruesome relief.

Only a moment Nelson stood, shaken by the merciless wind, scanning the piece of bronzed armor between his gloved hands with a fresh interest. It was beautifully fashioned, and decorated at the knee point with the wonderfully wrought figure of a dolphin.

If he could only think clearly! But his brain seemed to lie in a red-hot skull. "Whatever's happened," he muttered, "I'd better not waste time; they couldn't have been here so long ago. Poor Alden! I wonder what kind of devils caught him?"

EVEN before he had finished the sentence the aviator had taken up the partially obliterated trail of spattered blood drops. That what he sought appeared to be a maraudering party of giants restrained him not at all. The one clear thought burning in his weary brain was that Richard Alden, his best friend—the man with whom he had traveled over half the world, by whose side he had faced many a perilous situation—must at that moment lie in peril, the extent of which he could only surmise.

"Must have been about a dozen of them," he said thickly. And, holding the Winchester ready, he commenced once more to plod on through the stinging sheets of wind-driven ice particles. More than once he had great difficulty in not losing that crimson trail, for here and there the restless, white crystals completely blotted out the splashes.

All at once Nelson checked his pathetically slow progress, finding himself on the top of an eminence, looking down in what appeared to be a vastly deep natural amphitheater of snow and ice. At the bottom, and perhaps a hundred yards distant, was a curious black oval from which appeared to rise a dense, wind-whipped column of whitish vapor.

"My eyes must be going back on me," muttered Nelson through stiffened lips. How intolerably heavy his fur suit seemed! His strength was about gone and that curious black mouthlike circle seemed infinitely far away. But, spurred by fears for his friend, he started downward for the precipitious trail leading directly towards it.

Once he stepped inside the crater, he became conscious of a terrific side pressure which gripped him as a whirlpool seizes a luckless swimmer. The wind buffetted him from all angles, dealing him powerful blows on face and body, which, too strong for his weary body, sent him reeling weakly, drunkenly across the hard, glare ice towards the vortex. Twice he slipped, each time finding it harder to arise. But at last he approached what on closer inspection proved to be a subterranean vent of black rock.

"Steam!" he gasped. "It's steam coming out of there!"

SWAYED by a dozen conflicting emotions, he paused, the Winchester barrel wavering like a reed in his enfeebled grasp.

"The whole thing's crazy," he decided. "I must be frozen and lying somewhere, delirious. Poor Dick! Can't help him much now."

Like a man in a nightmare who advances but feels nothing under his feet, Nelson staggered on towards that huge, gaping aperture of black rock. On the threshold a pool of melted snow water made him stare.

"Hell!" he said. "It's only a volcanic vent of some kind." Then dimly came the recollection of Eskimo legends concerning thermal springs beyond the desolate and unknown reaches of Grant Land.

His mind in an indescribable turmoil, Nelson splashed across a hundred yards of sodden snow, then shivered on wading knee deep through a pool of melted ice. Now he stood on the very threshold of that awful opening, dense clouds of vapor beating warmly against his chilled features.

His goggles fogged at once, blinding him effectively as, with reason staggering under the accumulated stress of starvation and the circumstances of Alden's disappearance, he groped his way a few feet into the vent. With his left hand he pulled up the glasses from his sunken, bloodshot eyes.

"It's warm, by God!" he cried in astonishment as the skin exposed by lifting the goggles came in contact with the air. "Must be some kind of earth-warmed cave."

INCREASINGLY mystified, he caught up his rifle and strode on down the passage, at that moment illuminated by the last unearthly rays of

the aurora borealis. A single, dazzling beam played before him like a powerful searchlight, to light a high vaulted tunnel of basalt rocks which were distorted by some long-gone convulsion of the earth into a hundred weird cleavages and faults. For that brief instant he found he could see perhaps a hundred feet down into a high roofed passage, along the top of which poured a tremendous stream of billowing, writhing steam.

"If this doesn't beat all," he murmured; but for all of his apprehension he did not pause. Those bloody splashes bespeaking Alden's pressing need urged him on. "Look's like I'm taking a one way trip into Hell itself. Well, we'll soon see."

Slipping and sliding over an almost impassable array of black rocks and boulders, Nelson fought his way forward, conscious that with every stride the air grew damper and warmer. Soon trickles of sweat were pouring down over his chest, tickling unbearably.

Then all at once the ray of light faded, leaving him immersed in a blackness equalled only by the gloom of a subterranean valut. He stopped and, resting his rifle against a nearby invisible rock, threw back the parka hood and pulled off his gloves. He was amazed to feel how warm the strong air current was on his hands.

"Beats all," he muttered heavily. "I wonder where they've taken Alden?"

MEANWHILE his hands groped through fur garments now wet with melted snow and ice particles, searching for the catch to open that pocket in which lay a small but powerful electric flashlight, an instrument without which no far-flying aviator finds himself. After a moment's fumbling, his yet stiffened fingers encountered the cylindrical flash and, with a low cry of satisfaction, he drew it forth to press the button.

"Mighty useful, I—" The words stopped, frozen on his lips. Before the parka edge his close cropped hair seemed to rise, and his breath stopped midway in his lungs. Sharp electric shocks shook him, for there, half revealed in the feeble flashlight's glare, was a sight which shook his sanity to the snapping point. Not fifty feet away two eyes, large as dinner plates, with narrow vertical red irises, were trained on him. Rooted to the ground by the paralysis of utter horror, Nelson saw that their color was a weird, unhealthy, greenish white, rather like the color of a radio-light watch dial.

Strangely intense, these huge orbs wavered not at all, filling him with an unnameable dread, while the strong odor of musk assailed his nostrils. The flashlight slipped from between Nelson's fingers and, no longer having his thumb on the button, flickered out.

Helpless, Nelson stood transfixed against a boulder, aware that the strange, musky scent was becoming stronger. Then to his ears came a dry scrabbling as of some large body stealthily advancing. Those horrible, unearthly eyes were coming nearer! Fierce, terrible shocks of fear gripped the exhausted aviator. Then the impulse of self-preservation, that most elementary of all instincts, forced him to snatch up the rifle, to sight hastily, blindly, between those two, great greenish eyes. Choking out a strangled sob of desperation, Nelson made his trembling finger close over the cold strip of steel that must be the trigger.

LIKE a stage trick, the cavern was momentarily lit by a strong, orange yellow glare. Then the Winchester's report thundered and roared deafeningly; coincidentally arose a nerve-shattering scream. An exhalation, foul as a corpse long unburied, fanned his face. Terrified, he flattened to the rock wall as a huge, though dangerously agile body hurtled by with the speed of a runaway horse. Presently followed the sound of a ponderous fall, then a series of shrill, ear-piercing gibberings and squeakings, like those of a titanic rat—squeaks that rang like the

chorus of Hell itself. Gradually they grew fainter, while in the darkness the heavy air of the tunnel became rank with the odor of clotting blood.

Nelson remained where he was, shaking like a frightened horse and bathed with a cold sweat.

"Wonder what it was?" he muttered numbly.

He broke off, for in the terrible darkness sounded a low but perfectly audible *thud! thud! thud! thud!* —and also the subtle noise of some rough surface rasping gently over the stone. His nerves crisped and shrieked for relief.

"It's coming again!" he told himself, and ejected the spent cartridge from the Winchester. "No use—it'll get me, but I may as well fight as long as I can."

Even stronger grew the musty smell of blood while that uncanny *thud! thud!* sound continued at regular intervals. Nelson waited, breath halted and finger on trigger, but still the darkness yielded no glimpse of those awful saucer-like eyes.

EMBOLDENED, he stooped and, jerking off his left glove, commenced to grope among the boulders. Somewhere near at his feet the flashlight must be lying. Hoping against hope that its fall had not shattered the bulb, he ran his fingers over the cold, damp stones, every instant expecting to feel the clutch of the unseen monster. How tiny, how puny he was! All at once his fingers encountered the smooth familiar shape of the flash and he raised it cautiously through the darkness. Patiently he shifted the Winchester to his left hand in order to set the flashlight on the top of a flat rock, pointing it as nearly as he could determine in the direction from whence came those ominous, stealthy sounds.

"Guess I'll switch on the light," he decided, "and trust to drop whatever it is before it reaches me."

Taking a fresh grip on his quivering nerves, Nelson cautiously cocked the .38-55, cuddled the familiar stock to his shoulder. He sighted, then with his right hand pushed down the catch lever of the flashlight.

Instantly a dazzling white beam shot forth to shatter the gloom. The hair on the back of Nelson's hands itched unbearably, while the cold fingers of madness clutched at his brain, for the sight which met his eyes all but bereft him of his wavering sanity. There, belly up, across a low ridge of basalt, lay a hideous reptile, which in form faintly resembled an enormous and fantastic kangaroo. Its scabby belly was of the unhealthy yellow of a grub, a hue which gave way to a leaden gray as the wart-covered skin reached the back. Two enormous hind legs, each thick as a man's torso and each equipped with three dagger-like talons, struck out in helpless fury at the air, while a long, lizard-like tail threshed powerfully back and forth, scattering ponderous boulders right and left as though they had been marbles. The flashlight being trained as it was, the monster's head and forequarters were invisible, all save two very much smaller and shorter front legs which, like the hinder ones, clawed spasmodically.

"The D. T's!" gasped Nelson, conscious that he was trembling like an aspen. He suppressed a wild desire to laugh. "Yes, I've gone crazy!"

HE glanced downwards and leaped swiftly back, for, creeping over the stones towards his fur outer boots, meandered a wide rivulet of bright scarlet blood. From its surface rose small curling feathers of steam which, drifting towards the tunnel's roof, merged with that gray, vaporous current flowing steadily towards the sunless Arctic expanse outside.

It took Nelson a long five minutes to sufficiently recover his equilibrium for action. All he could do was to stare at that grotesque, gargoyle-like creature as it writhed in leisurely and persistent death throes.

"Guess I winged it all right! My God, what a nasty beast! Looks like one of those allosaurs I read about in college. It couldn't be, though—that tribe of dinosaurs died out five million years ago."

Cautiously he scrambled around among the high black stones, casting the search light beams before him and holding the Winchester always ready in his hand while trying to recall snatches of palaeontology studied at college long years ago.

"Yes, it must be a survival of one of the carniverous dinosaurs," he decided, then paused, increasingly conscious of that steady thudding noise. What caused it?

AT last he found himself before the creature's gigantic and repulsive head which lay limp over a blood bathed stone, huge jaws partially open, and serrated rows of wicked, stilleto-sharp teeth gleaming yellowly in the flashlight's rays. The head in shape was bullet-like, ending in a blunt nose as big as a bushel basket and in two prominent nostrils. The green, lidless eyes were still open, shining faintly, and seemed to follow his movements, but the steaming blood poured with the force of a small hose from between triple row of bayonetlike teeth that curved inward like those of a shark, to splash and bubble freely to the rock floor and to dribble horribly over the warty, gray hide.

Then Nelson discovered an amazing fact. About the great scaly neck, thick as a boy's waist, was fastened a ponderous collar, set with short, sharp spikes.

Nelson gasped. "What in hell!" he cried. "This damn thing's somebody's property!" His mind staggered at the thought of dealing with a race that could and would domesticate such a hideous monster. "Well, it's no use standing here," he muttered, wiping the sweat from his eyes. "This isn't getting poor Alden away from those devils."

Thud! thud! In the act of turning he paused, listened once more. Then he discovered to his amazement that the heart of the apparently dead reptile was still beating strongly. He could even see the yellow skin of its belly rise and fall. The effect was grotesque, uncanny.

"Of course," muttered the shaken aviator, "I'd forgotten a reptile's ganglions will keep on beating for hours, like that shark we killed off Paumotu. Its heart didn't stop for five hours."

LEAVING the slain allosaurus behind, the aviator limped onwards, doggedly following a trail which wound down, ever onwards, into the depths of the earth. Gradually the air became so filled with steam that he stripped off his fur jumper and trousers. Clad in a khaki flannel shirt, serge trousers and shoepacks, he paused long enough to count his cartridges, and found there were just fourteen. Hell! Not very many with which to venture into an unknown abyss. He distributed them in his pockets, and, somewhat relieved of the weight of the fur suit, took up his advance, playing the flashlight ahead of him as he went.

"Poor Alden," he thought. "I wonder if he's still alive?"

Every moment expecting to stumble over the mangled corpse of his friend he hurried on, making better time over the cavern floor, but soon even the lighter clothing commenced to feel oppressive.

"Must be the earth's heat," he muttered, while the steam clouds rolled by him like ghostly serpents. "Guess the crust is very thin here—something like Yellowstone. Probably I'll find some thermal springs ahead."

Just as he spoke the tunnel took a sharp turn to the right. He scrambled around the bend to stand petrified, for with the suddenness of lightning a flood of dazzling orange-red light sprang into being. Momentarily it blinded him, then revealed strange, incomprehensible scenes. It appeared

that two short shafts of incandescent flame roared through transparent columns of glass on either side of the passage some fifty yards distant. Subconsciously Nelson realized that these columns began and ended in stonework that was smooth and well joined.

AS his eyes became accustomed to the glare he distinguished beside each light pillar two bronze doors, some eight feet high and semicircular in shape. These had been evidently pulled back to expose the lights. Then his breath stopped in his throat, for there, standing beside them, was a gleaming group of six or eight of the strangest creatures Nelson could ever have imagined. They were men—there was no mistaking that—men of normal size, but they were so helmeted and incased in a curious type of armor that for a moment he believed them gargoyles.

Quite motionless he stood, clutching the cold barrel of the Winchester in a spasmodic grip and staring up at those two watch-towers, built like gigantic swallows' nests into sheer rock wall. He could see the warriors stationed there, peering curiously down at him from the depths of heavy, bronze helmets—helmets which in shape much resembled those of an ancient Grecian hoplite, for the nose guards and cheek pieces descended so low as to completely mask the features of those strange guards. For crests these helmets bore exquisitely wrought bronze dolphins, with brilliant blue eyes of sapphire. But what fascinated Nelson most was the curious armor they wore. Beneath breast plates of polished bronze, these strange warriors wore what seemed to be a kind of chain mail—yet it was not that, for the texture had more the appearance of some heavy but pliant leather, finished with a metallic surfacing.

Suddenly the spell of mutual amazement was broken, for a tall warrior in a breast plate that glittered with diamonds and seemed altogether more ornate than the rest, clapped a short brass horn to his lips and blew a single piercing note. At once there appeared on the tunnel's floor, not a hundred yards from the startled aviator, a rank of perhaps twenty soldiers, accoutred exactly like those he beheld by the light boxes. They came scrambling over the boulders, their shadows grotesquely preceding them. In their hands were long shafted spears, and on their left arms rectangular shields, charged with a lively dolphin in the act of swimming. Some of them, however, held short hoses in their hands, hoses that sprouted from tight brass coils strapped to their broad shoulders.

AGAIN the commanding figure aloft raised the horn. From the tail of his eye Nelson caught the gleam of metal in the orange glare. While a blast, harsh as the scream of a fire siren, echoed and re-echoed eerily through the passage, there appeared a fresh detachment. Nelson shrank back in horror, for these bronze-armored warriors led, at the end of a powerful chain, two more of those huge, ferocious allosaurs, exactly like the one he had slain but a short while back.

Like well regulated automatons the hoplite rank opened to permit the passage of those repulsive, eager monsters, then closed up again and halted, spears levelled before them in the precise manner of an ancient Grecian phalanx, while the men with those curious hose-like contrivances ran out to guard the flanks.

"I'm done for now," thought Nelson as he threw off the Winchester's safety catch. "I suppose they'll turn those nightmares loose on me."

He was right. For all the world as though they led war dogs, the keepers in brazen armor advanced, the dull metallic clank of their accoutrement clearly discernible above the sibilant hiss of their hideous charges, which hopped along grotesquely like kangaroos, using their long and powerful tails as a counterpoise.

Then the officer watching from the left hand swallow's nest shouted a hoarse, unintelligible command, whereupon one of the keepers raised his right hand in a sharp gesture that instantly flattened the incredible monster to earth, exactly like an obedient bird dog.

As in a fantastic dream Nelson watched one of the armored guardians unsnap the hook of the powerful chain by which his allosaurus was secured. Then, whistling sharply, he clapped his hands and pointed straight at the motionless aviator. The creature's green white eyes flickered back and forth, and a chill, colder than the outer Arctic, invaded Nelson's breast as those unearthly eyes came to rest upon him.

MEANWHILE the other allosaurus remained crouched, whining impatiently for its keepers to cast it loose.

Fixing burning eyes upon the American, the foremost keeper threw back his head. "Ahre-e-e!" he shouted. Instantly the freed allosaurus arose, balanced its enormous bulk, then commenced to leap forward at tremendous speed, clearing fifteen or twenty feet with each jump and uttering a curious, whistling scream as it bore down, a terrifying vision of gleaming teeth and talons.

Shaking off the paralysis of despair, Nelson whipped up the Winchester and, as before, sighted squarely between those blazing, gemlike eyes. When the huge monster was but twenty feet away he fired, and the report thundered and banged in the cavern like the crash of a summer storm. In mid-air the ghastly carnivore seemed to stagger. Its tail twitched sharply as in an effort to recover its balance. Then, quite like any normal creature that is shot through the head, it lost all sense of direction and made great convulsive leaps, around and around, clawing madly at the air, bumping into the rock walls and uttering soul-shaking shrieks of agony. Like a gargoyle gone mad it reeled back towards the startled rank of spearmen. As it came, Nelson saw the second allosaurus rear itself backwards and, balanced on its tail, strike out with powerful hind legs as its maddened fellow drew near.

Like razors the great talons ripped through the dying allosaurs' belly, exposing the gray-red intestines as the stricken creature raced by, snapping crazily at the empty air.

A single mighty sweep of the monsters' tail crushed five or six of the panic-stricken keepers and guards, strewing them like broken and abandoned marionettes among the stones. Hissing and obviously terrified, the second dinosaur watched the dying struggles of its mate; then, obedient to a terrified shout from its keepers, wheeled about to join in a frantic rout of the spearmen, who, casting aside shield, spear and brass coil, fled for dear life in the direction of those invisible passages through which they had appeared.

CHAPTER II

NO less amazed and alarmed than those vanished soldiers, Nelson remained rooted to the ground, conscious that in the swallow's nest overhead there remained only the officer—a tall, broad shouldered man with golden beard showing from under the cheek pieces of his helmet. Across the body of the still writhing monster their glances met. Nelson could see by the light of those strange pillars of fire that the other's eyes were blue as any Norseman's. Leaning far out over the stone parapet the other stared down upon the aviator from the depths of his jewelled helmet in a strange mixture of curiosity and awe.

Suddenly Nelson's nerves snapped and he shook a trembling fist at the martial figure above.

"Go away!" he shrieked, and reeled back on the edge of collapse. "Go

away, you damn phantom! You're driving me crazy—crazy, I tell you!"

The other stiffened, then turned and, uttering a hoarse shout, vanished, leaving the noiseless and apparently heatless pillar of fire flaring steadily.

Recovering somewhat, Nelson set his teeth, advanced to the nearest corpse, stooped and regarded him who lay there, with bronze helmet fallen off.

"It's a man and not a ghost," he murmured as his finger encountered flesh that was still warm. "Red headed too, or I'm a liar. Now what in hell is all this?"

For all his bewilderment he began to feel better and his swaying reason became steadier. "Bronze, bronze—nothing but bronze," the aviator told himself as he further examined the scattered equipment. "Evidently these fellows don't know the use of iron or steel."

WITH increased curiosity he bent over another splendidly built dead man who lay with back broken and sightless eyes staring fixidly onto the steam current meandering silently along the cavern's roof. From the fallen man's belt were slung half a dozen curious weapons that looked not unlike potato mashers, except that they were bronze headed and had wooden handles.

"Hum," he commented, "kind of like the grenades the Boche used in the late lamented. Wonder what the devil these are?"

Suddenly his ear detected the sound of a footstep and, on looking swiftly up, he beheld that same yellow bearded officer who had directed the attack. This strange being had taken off his ponderous helmet to carry it in his left hand, while his right was held vertically in the immemorial sign of peace. On he came with powerful martial strides, a brilliant green cloak flapping gently behind him and the jewels in his brazen armor glinting like so many tiny colored eyes. The stranger was indeed handsome, Nelson noticed—and then he received perhaps the greatest shock of the whole chimerical adventure. The gold bearded man halted some twenty feet away, smiled and spoke in a curiously inflected but perfectly recognizable voice.

"Welcome to the Empire of the Atlans. Prithee, Wanderer, what be thy name?"

For a long moment Nelson was entirely too taken back to make a reply. Desperately his already perplexed brain tried to comprehend. Here was a handsome six-footer, dressed in the arms of an ancient race, speaking English of the seventeenth century!

AS at a phantom, he regarded the stalwart, faintly ominous figure, from heavy leather sandals to bronze greaves, thence to wide belt from which dangled more of those curious grenadelike objects. His glance paused on the officer's beautifully wrought bronze cuirasse or breast plate which showed in relief an emerald scaled dolphin and trident. These, Nelson decided, must be the national emblems of this incomprehensible nation.

Then their eyes met, held each other a long moment until the tall officer's features, disfigured by a long red scar across the jaw, broke into a hard smile.

"Hero Giles Hudson begs thy pardon," he said, "but methought thou spoke in the language of Sir Henry Hudson, my ancestor?"

"Sir Henry Hudson!" stammered Nelson incredulously. "The old explorer whose men turned him adrift? So that's why you're talking embalmed English!" In desperation his weary brain strove to understand.

"I know naught," replied the other with a grave smile, "save that the founder of our royal line spoke what he called English. He came from the Ice World to rule wisely over Atlans. He was the greatest Atlantean of history."

"Atlantean?" echoed Nelson, while his mind groped frantically in the recess of his memory. "Atlans, Atlan-

tis!" A great light broke upon him. "The lost Atlantis! Great God!" Had he stumbled upon a remnant of that powerful people whose fabled empire had been drowned ten centuries ago in the cold waves of the Atlantic?

"AYE," the yellow haired warrior continued as though reading his thoughts, "long centuries ago this valley was peopled by those who escaped the great cataclysm which ended the mother country. Later came another race, barbarian wanderers like thyself." He bowed for all the world like a courtly English gentleman. "But methinks thou art in need of food and sustenance?"

"You bet I'm hungry," was Nelson's emphatic reply. "I'm one short jump of starvation and the D. T.'s. But hold on a minute," he cried. "I'm looking for a friend of mine. He went by here, didn't he?"

"Aye." A crafty expression Nelson did not like crept into Hero Giles Hudson's face as he solemnly inclined his head.

"For the nonce, fair sir, thy companion is hale and sound. I beg your patience."

With a quick gesture the Atlantean raised his dolphin-shaped horn and blew three short blasts while Nelson, in sudden alarm, cocked his rifle and brought it in line with the other's chest. The glittering officer saw the motion, but made no effort to move from the line of sights.

"Thy gesture avails naught," said he with stiff courtesy. "When Hero Giles gives his word, it stands good though Heliopolis and the Empire of the Atlans fall."

One by one half a dozen spearmen appeared, all obviously very frightened and only moved by an apparently Spartan discipline. Promptly they saluted, whereupon the Hero—as his title appeared to be—uttered a number of brief commands in some guttural language entirely unintelligible to the dazed aviator.

PRESENTLY a strange column appeared, composed of some fifteen or twenty disarmed men marching between a double rank of heavily equipped hoplites. As they drew near, they clasped imploring hands and evidently begged for mercy from the stern, tight jawed figure at Nelson's side. Contemptuous and unhearing the prisoners' piteous pleadings and lamentations, Hero Giles scowled upon them and deliberately turned his back.

"What are they?" inquired Nelson, vaguely alarmed. "Enemies?"

"Yes." There was a certain bitter savagery in the speaker's voice. "These are the dauntless defenders of Atlans who ran at the report of thy weapon. Presently they die."

It was useless to interfere. The horrified aviator knew it and watched with compassionate eyes while the condemned soldiers were ranged in a single, white faced line. They remained silent now, seeming to have found courage now that hope was dead.

Upon brief command from a subaltern, the guards wheeled about and retreated perhaps twenty yards down the passage. There they halted, glittering eyes peering through the slots in their helmets to fix themselves upon the rigid prisoners who stood numbly resigned to death.

With surprising speed each member of that weird firing squad detached a brazen grenade from his belt, then threw back his arm in exactly the same attitude as a bomb-throwing doughboy. Then there came a short, sharp command and some fifteen or twenty grenades bobbed through the air to crash on the stones at the feet of the victims.

HIS head swimming with repulsion at the slaughter, Nelson beheld a curious sight. It seemed that from the broken grenades appeared a yellowish green vapor which sprung *of its own accord* upon the silent upright rank! In an instant it settled like falling snow upon the doomed soldiers. For

a breathless fraction of a second they stood, eyes wide with horror, then collapsed, kicking and struggling as men do under the influence of gas.

"Horrible!" gasped Nelson. "What was in the bombs?"

"A vapor," explained Hero Giles shortly. "A fungus vapor which, falling upon exposed flesh, instantly invades the blood and multiplies by millions. See—" He pointed to the nearest dead man and Nelson, with starting eyes, watched a yellowish growth commencing to sprout from the dead man's nostrils. Swiftly the poisonous mould threw out tiny branches, spreading with astounding rapidity over the skin until, in less than a minute after the grenades had exploded, the whole tumbled heap of dead were covered with a horrible yellow green fungus growth.

"Thou seest?" Hero Giles demanded. "Powerful, is it not? It is against the fungus vapor we wear this body armor made from the skin of a small lizard which inhabits our mountains."

Shocked and appalled, Nelson watched the retreat of the solemn, silent execution party.

Other soldiers fell to unconcernedly stripping their fallen comrades of equipment; then, to Nelson's horrified surprise, two hideous allosauri reappeared, shepherded by some six or eight keepers. Once the horrible creatures were released, they pounced upon the dead and, snarling horribly, commenced to rend and devour the corpses.

TOO shaken to comment or to make the protest he knew to be futile, Nelson followed the stalwart English-speaking officer into a bronze door set in the cavern wall and up a short flight of stairs into what appeared to be a guard room, where food and wine were immediately set before the famished aviator.

"Yea," Hero Giles was saying as he sat down a beautiful goblet and wiped the last traces of wine from his beard, "we will soon o'ertake thy friend. He was but little hurt, and thou wilt assuredly join him in judgment before our great Emperor, Altorius XXII, at Heliopolis, our capitol."

"Heliopolis?" mumbled Nelson, his mouth full of delicious stew that seemed to be made of veal. "Heliopolis? How far away is it?"

"A hundred leagues more or less," the other smiled. "Almost a third of the distance up this great valley."

"One hundred leagues! Three hundred miles! Then we won't be there for several days."

The Hero's deep, rather ominous laughter rang out in the little rock hewn chamber. "Days?" he jeered. "Days? Art thou mad? In two hours from the time we board the tube-road thou shalt learn thy fate from his Serene Highness."

"What!" Nelson's sunken and bloodshot gray eyes widened, while his jaw dropped incredulously. "One hundred leagues in two hours? As I remember there are about three miles to a league, so a hundred leagues in two hours means one hundred and fifty miles an hour! Why, that's utterly impossible! The Twentieth Century Limited doesn't go half so fast."

Several enormous emeralds set into the other's bronze cuirasse glittered softly and the Hero's cold blue eyes hardened as his hand sought the grenade belt.

"Impossible? Dost doubt my words, sirrah?" With an effort he controlled himself. "Nay, thou shalt see for thyself ere long. The tube-road runs from Heracles to Heliopolis. Thou canst trace its course on this map here on the wall."

"The dog-born devils of Jarmuth have no such means of travel," continued the Atlantean, with a touch of smug pride that reminded Nelson of a small town Middle Westerner speaking of the "rightest, tightest little town west of the Mississippi."

Nelson found it extremely weird to be sitting there in a heavy arm chair, drinking good red wine with a fierce armor-clad warrior who wore sandals,

sword and a war cloak such as might have graced the limbs of Alexander of Macedon. But with the food and rich warm wine, he felt blood, strength and self-confidence pouring back into his weary body. "Jarmuth?" he inquired. "What is Jarmuth?"

At his question the domineering, predatory face across the table darkened and the scar on his cheek flamed red as a scowl of hatred gripped Hero Giles' visage.

"Jarmuth!" snarled the Hero, and his great hand closed like a vise. "Jarmuth! A nation of treacherous, gold-adoring cannibals, whose countless hordes, spawned in the hot lowlands, ever threaten our frontiers. I tell thee, Friend Nelson, the dog-sired Jereboam will not rest until mighty Heliopolis lies in a heap of smoking ashes."

"Evidently," thought Nelson, taken aback at the other's vehemence, "this lad's English only in speech. I guess he's all Atlantean outside of that."

WARMING to a fiercer pitch, the other fixed his guest with a smoldering gaze. "Jarmuth lies beyond Apidanus, the boiling river, and is the home of a savage horde whose horrid rites in Jezreel, the capitol, stink as an offense to Saturn and the High Gods! Why, mark you," the warrior prince continued, interrupting his tirade to gulp a goblet of wine, "five years ago, by treachery, they seized the beauteous Altara, sister of our gracious Emperor, and upon the annual feast of Beelzebub, that vile demon they worship, the dark dogs would have sacrificed and devoured her, according to their rites, had not our Emperor dispatched a ransom of six fair maidens to take her place.

"Every year since then Jereboam has exacted that same tribute. Every year their princes and priests gorge themselves on the tender white flesh of our fairest and noblest maidens. But this tribute must end! The augurs have told us so. Help will come from the Ice World." Hero Giles brought crashing down on the table a brawny fist, on whose wrist was fixed a bright, gem-studded bracelet.

Horror-stricken, Nelson nodded.

"It is for this alone," continued the Hero somberly, "that thy life and that of thy friend have been spared."

"So? I didn't notice," broke in Nelson, "that you particularly went out of your way to preserve my health a while back."

The heavy golden head shook slowly and a grim smile played about those thin cruel lips. "Nay, but I could have had thee slain. Come, as we go to the tube-road I'll show thee how much thou liest in the hollow of this, my hand." He thrust out a broad, powerful palm. "Forget not, fair sir. At any moment I or my Imperial Master may choose to close that hand."

"Perhaps!" stated Nelson, feeling it imperative to keep up his pose of independence. "But it might just happen that your hand would close on a porcupine, and so far from hurting the porcupine it would be your hand that would be hurt."

"Sirrah!" The Atlantean sprang to his feet and one hand shot to the grip of his ponderous, bronze sword; but even more quickly Nelson snatched up his rifle, a thin smile playing on his lips.

"Drop it," he snapped. "Control yourself, or I'll plug you like that allosaur. Be reasonable, can't you? We both want something, and perhaps can help each other gain it."

THE taut, menacing figure in armor relaxed and, with a gentle clank of accoutrement, Hero Giles resumed his seat.

"Prithee pardon me," he apologized ungraciously. "I was ever a hot-head and there is much in what thou says. We wish to force an end to this annual tribute—if not to regain our beloved Altara. And thou"—his heavy, golden eyebrows shot up—"and thou, what dost thou wish?"

Nelson lowered the menacing barrel.

"I want the return of Richard Alden, free passage back to that spot where he was captured and plenty of food and help should we need it. If I aid you in one, you must promise me in the other."

"Aye," returned the other doubtfully. "But I myself can pledge naught save thy immediate safety. 'Tis for our Imperial Majesty to say whether both thou and thy friend shall live, or whether ye shall feed our war dogs. Come now, we must go to Heliopolis."

Map of Jarmuth and Atlans

Picking up his heavy, bronze helmet the Atlantean prince set it on his yellow head and waited impatiently for Nelson to drain the last of his wine. Then, with a swirl of his green cloak, he vanished through the rock wall, closely followed by a singularly distracted and alarmed aviator.

CHAPTER III

A BRIGHT yellow glare steadily increased to mark the end of the tunnel down which the two had progressed; then, with the sharp abruptness of a hand-clap, there resounded a loud challenge in that unintelligible Atlantean language, above which the hiss of steam could be loudly heard.

Instantly the Atlantean prince strode forward, a commanding figure. Momentarily his helmet and the dangling grenadelike bombs were sharply outlined against that unearthly yellow light. He raised his hand and dropped it, palm outward, to his chin in what must have been a salute. The hissing sound of steam then faded into silence.

Followed at a respectful distance by a pair of silent, bronze-helmeted hoplites, Nelson and his guide descended a narrow stair, which broadened at the base. It was a very long staircase composed of perhaps two or three hundred steps which were occasionally interrupted by wide stone terraces. On these level spaces were fixed what appeared to be enormous field guns of glittering brass. They were similar, yet somehow oddly dissimilar, to the great guns Nelson had seen in France.

"Behold, oh Wanderer," Hero Giles declaimed impressively, "the lands of Atlans and Jarmuth!"

It was a weird landscape that met Nelson's half-unbelieving gaze, a landscape green with that brilliance peculiar to spring meadows, lying beneath the same deep blue sky that overarched the surrounding barren ice fields which hemmed in this astounding valley.

A SLIGHT smile played over Hero Giles' thin lips as he watched the amazed aviator.

"The splendor of our country must indeed astound thee," he observed, "having come from the dreary fastness of the outer Ice World. But come; we are now to pass the great retortii guarding the entrance into the valley."

Nelson's eyes turned again to the weapons that so oddly resembled field guns. He examined them closely, inspecting them narrowly for the differences he knew must exist between them and the artillery that had thundered during the War of the Nations.

The chief difference lay in the mounting of these starkly beautiful weapons. They seemed to be fixed on a movable pivot set into the coal black rock itself. Like modern artillery, these curious pieces of ordnance bore a bronze shield to protect their crews, through which projected the long and very narrow barrels of the guns. Grouped like cannoneers about their piece stood various red-crested Atlantean artillerymen. At a glance Nelson recognized the difference in their equipment from that of the spearmen behind them. These former bore no shields, no swords or bombs, but wore that same kind of leather body-armor which graced the powerful limbs of Hero Giles. Their helmets, too, were different: only the dolphin crest with a tuft of red feathers spouting from it bore any resemblance to those of the infantry, and, moreover, the artillerymen's eyes were shielded by goggles with thick blue lenses.

AS the Hero approached, officers among them saluted, then sank on one knee with head humbly bent.

"Rather odd looking guns," commented Nelson. "I'm not much of an artilleryman, but I'm wondering how you take up the recoil?"

The Atlantean's laugh, which always reminded his guest of the purr of a tiger, rang out. "Why, marry, good sir, there is no recoil! These guns do not use that powder which Sir Henry, founder of our line, did speak of. Thou wouldst see one fired?"

His curiosity immeasurably piqued, Nelson nodded, whereupon the Atlantean wheeled about and barked a brief command. With truly Prussian precision, the artillerymen sprang to their posts, some to a series of levers which sprouted from the rock platform without any apparent connection, and some to wheels and gauges of varying size that clustered in bewildering intricacy about the breech of the great brass gun.

"Markest thou that tree yonder, on the ledge of the valley?" The Atlantean's blunt outstretched finger indicated a towering pine sprouting from among a mass of reddish volcanic rock at the rim of that new world.

"Yes, I see it, but—" Nelson was astounded. A pine tree in the upper Arctic! That alone was sufficient cause for amazement. From a stiff red-plumed gun captain issued a brief series of commands which set the wonderfully drilled crew to silently adjusting their training and elevating mechanism. Click! Clack! Sis-s-s-s!

ALL up and down the vast staircase other gun crews stood watching. Nelson saw their weird, bluish goggles raised to that platform where, for all the world like a coast defense howitzer, the great cannon swung majestically about on the ponderous, brazen column which seemed to support it. Gradually the muzzle was elevated, then traversed a few feet, to finally come to a halt.

"Jakul, à Hero!" shouted the gun

captain, his hand raised to Hero Giles.

"Thou art ready, Friend Nelson?" he inquired in tolerant amusement. "Mark well yon pine tree!

"Storr!"

Nelson saw one of the armored cannoneers bend forward, firmly grasp a short lever with both hands. In anticipation of a terrific report, the aviator pressed finger tips to his ears. There followed not a thundering crash, but a curious, eery, high-pitched scream, rather like that of a fire siren. There was no smoke! Nelson's incredulous eyes sought the muzzle of the gun and detected issuing from it what appeared to be a thin, white rod. This shimmering stream of silver shot straight towards the pine tree, gradually widening and giving off feathery billows of steam. In a fraction of a moment the target was completely veiled from sight in a furious pall of clouds which, to Nelson's great astonishment, did not dissipate nor condense with the speed of ordinary steam.

"Nava!"

With impressive suddenness the screaming sound faded, leaving a sort of stunned silence on the gun platform. The gunners stalked back to their original stations.

SLOWLY, reluctantly, the mist enveloping the pine tree cleared away and Nelson felt a chill creeping up his spine. The pine was a good three hundred yards away, yet now it sagged limp to earth, stripped of bark, twigs and needles, only the bright yellow trunk and major branches remaining.

"That tree was a good two feet thick," mused the astounded aviator, "yet the steam gun bent it like a sapling. My God! What would it do to a man?"

"What thinkest thou of our retortii?" The Atlantean's beard glinted like metal as he shook with a grim, silent laughter. "These great retortii can shoot half a league and will blast any living thing in their path. I tell thee, friend Nelson, the discharge of even a small retortii will strip the flesh from a man's bones as a peasant strips the husk from an ear of corn!"

"Fearful, terrible!" was Nelson's awed comment. "Is there no defence against them?"

"Of course." The Hero's green feather-crested helmet gleamed with a nod. "Was there ever an instrument of war that had not its defence? Yea, we have the blue vapor to shatter steam particles—it is called the blue maxima. Thou wilt presently see some of our troops armed with it."

"But where does this steam come from? How is it generated?" These two were the first of a host of questions which trembled on Nelson's lips.

"The steam," replied the Atlantean, "comes from the earth. We compress it many times, then feed it into our retortii. Without the heat of Mother Earth and our flame suns we would all perish. Steam is our motive power, our defence and our enemy!"

He flung his hand towards the vast valley stretched before them. It was hemmed in on either side by colossal breath-taking mountain ranges, whose caps shone and glittered with an eternal snow.

"Some foothills! They must rise all of 25,000 feet from the valley floor," decided the aviator, "and I should imagine this valley is a good mile below sea level. Yes! That must be it: this nightmare country lies in a huge geographical fault—something like the Dead Sea."

MILE after mile he could see fertile green land stretching away toward some low undulating hills on the horizon. Atlans was very thickly settled—that he recognized at once—for the terrain was divided and subdivided into a vast checker-board, such as he had seen in France and Germany, while terraces, green with produce, had been laboriously gouged out of the frowning mountain sides.

Then his eye encountered the source of that curious amber light which pervaded the whole valley. A titanic flaming gas vent spouted like a cyclopean torch from the peak of a nearby mountain. Its steady, subdued roar struck Nelson's ear as he turned away his eyes, for the glare was too intense to be long endured. Further down the valley were two more such incandescent vents, shooting their flaming tongues boldly into the sky, warming the air and casting that rich amber radiance over all.

"That is Mount Ossa nearest us," the Atlantean's voice came as though from a long distance. Victor Nelson was too staggered, too unspeakably amazed to register the fact of the Hero's proximity. "Below are Pelion and Jilboa, which, with Jabor, the greatest of all the flames, illuminate and warm the valley."

Nelson's eye, trained to be all observant, ranged far and wide, noting the presence of many lacy, frothing geysers which spouted at varying intervals. There were, also, many steaming ponds and waterfalls which sprang in smoky confusion from the rock palisades to either side.

NEARER at hand he could distinguish a number of huge stone structures, evidently forts and public buildings. Strategically placed all about were more of those terrible brass retortii, gleaming dully under the incandescent glare of the flame sun.

"Come," cried Hero Giles with an impatient gesture of his hand, "we must e'en hasten to the tube-road terminal. Word has long since been sent to Heliopolis of thy arrival."

Downwards into the valley, which grew ever warmer and more fertile, the Atlantean led on, explaining a thousand and one details to the astounded aviator. Presently they approached the nearest of the great stone structures and Nelson received yet another shock. In a courtyard was drilling what would correspond to a troop of cavalry in the outer world. In orderly ranks the troopers wheeled, marched and countermarched, their brazen armor twinkling and clashing softly as they carried out their evolutions with an amazing precision. But what astonished Nelson was the fact that each of these strange troopers bestrode a lithe, long-limbed variety of dinosaur, a good half smaller than the allosauri he had encountered in the tunnel. These agile creatures ran about on their hind legs with astonishing speed, using a long reptilian tail as a balance.

On the back of each trooper was fastened a compact circular copper tank, from which sprouted a flexible metal hose that ended in what looked like a ponderous type of pistol.

In distinction to the red of the artillerymen and the blue of the Hoplities, these curious cavalrymen wore brilliant crests of yellow feathers, and from their lance tips fluttered tiny pennons of that same color.

"They must travel at least as fast as a race horse," decided the aviator after studying the swift evolutions of the scaly chargers. To his ears came the curious dry scrape and rattle of their horny claws on the stone pavement of the drill yard.

He would have lingered to see more, for those grotesque, lizardlike chargers interested him immensely, but Hero Giles beckoned imperiously. So, dropping the Winchester to the hollow of his arm, Nelson followed him into the brilliantly gas-lit depths of the great structure.

EVERYWHERE were red bearded, white skinned soldiers, staring at him with the frank curiosity of children. Powerful, magnificiently built fellows they were, all in uniforms of different designs.

The walls about him, Nelson noticed, were covered with really beautiful friezes depicting various warlike scenes in that pure beauty of proportion found only in ancient Grecian temples.

On and on through resounding tunnels, past busy markets and barracks, hurried the two travelers. Then the Atlantean halted before a gracefully arched doorway where stood two hoplites, who immediately lowered spears to bar the passage. At a word from Hero Giles, however, they saluted and fell back in position—immovable, grim guardians.

Inside was a short staircase, beautifully wrought of bronze. Up this flashed the Atlantean's mail-clad body; then he came to a halt under the direct rays of a blinding light.

Nelson, on arriving above, discovered that the chamber was lined with jointless brass about ten feet high and circular in shape. "What's this?" he demanded curiously.

"The terminal of the tube-road. In a moment thou shalt see the great cylinder arrive."

The words were hardly by the Hero's lips when there appeared, noiselessly and amid a great rush of air, a huge metal cylinder that ran upon a sort of truck. It rumbled up to the edge of the platform and from its end a small door was opened.

HERO GILES exchanged a few sentences with an elderly man who appeared to act as control master, then he indicated the glowing doorway of the cylinder.

Firmly clutching his Winchester, Nelson bowed his head and stepped inside, there to discover a luxury he had never anticipated. The interior of the cylinder was brilliantly lit and on both sides were ranged wide divans, strewn with many silken cushions. In a rack nearby were several graceful glass amphora, filled with red and tawny wine.

"The cylinder must be about thirty feet long," the marvelling American told himself, "and about ten feet in diameter. Guess it works on the same principle as the compressed air tubes the department stores use to send change with."

Gingerly he tested the nearest divan and marvelled at the curious softness of what appeared to be a gigantic tiger skin. Meanwhile Hero Giles entered, his stern features even more serious, but with him was a younger man who resembled him not a little.

"Fair brother," said the Atlantean to his companion, "this is he of whom I spoke. Friend Nelson, this is Hero John, my next youngest brother—he, too, speaks the language of the great Sir Henry Hudson."

The metallic clang of the door being shut brought a sharp qualm to Nelson's heart. "What are they doing?" he demanded quickly.

"The menials bolt the door beyond," explained Hero Giles with amused gravity. "In a moment our cylinder will be placed in the dispatching chamber, where steam pressure will be exerted. We shall then be hurled through this vacuum tube-road to Heliopolis, greatest city of Atlans. In an hour we will be there."

Outside sounded the sudden insistent clangor of a gong, and immediately the hiss of steam grew louder. The car shuddered as the hissing rose to an eery scream, then all at once the cylinder leaped forward, nearly hurling Nelson from his seat. He struggled as best he might to gain his equilibrium, for the eyes of the others were on him.

Then, more smoothly, the great cylinder gathered speed and hurtled on through the darkness of the tube-road towards Heliopolis, where Victor Nelson would read the book of Fate.

CHAPTER IV

ON the arrival platform at Heliopolis reigned a fierce excitement. Nelson noted countless armed and unarmed warriors hurrying to and fro, desperately intent on reaching their various posts, and snarling ill-temperedly as they elbowed their fellows aside. As soon as they appeared, Hero Giles and his brother became the center of an exicted press of gorgeously armored officers.

"Hum!" murmured the aviator under his breath. "Something's happened. Must be a revolution, an earthquake or a Democratic convention in town; these boys seem all steamed up."

Intently he studied the ring of fierce, red bearded faces surrounding his late hosts and gathered that indeed some event of overwhelming importance had taken place. Presently a splendid falcon-eyed old man in a yellow cloak strode up, struggling to control himself. His resemblance to the two Heros struck Nelson immediately.

"Harken ye," he cried, in that Elizabethan English which appeared to be the hieratic language of the New Atlantis' rulers. "Have ye heard? The dog-conceived sons of Semites have broken the truce! But three measures gone by, a brigade of their mounted podokesons swooped down on this very suburb of Tricca, yea, to the very gates of Heliopolis! The foul man-eating dogs slaughtered royal serfs and burnt two quarters of the suburb to the ground! Moreover, they seized that prisoner"—Nelson's heart gave a great leap at the word—"whom thou sentest from the mountain passes."

"What!" In two swift strides Nelson was before the gray beard, his blood-shot eyes blazing with a strange light. "What did you say about that prisoner?"

THE old man, who had obviously not noticed Nelson's presence, was thunderstruck to hear him speak in English until Hero Giles briefly explained his presence.

"Yea!" continued the elder, flinging lamentations furiously over his shoulder, "these swine of the Lost Tribes captured him and slew his escort. They have retreated towards the Apidanus, slaying, burning and pillaging as they go."

A sickening, deadly fear gripped the weary aviator. This was too much! Bad as it was to have Richard Alden captured by these weird descendants of a long vanished race, it was far worse to have him fall into the hands of their deadly enemies, the Jarmuthians, decadent survivors of Israel's Five Lost Tribes. The possibility of a rescue now seemed hopelessly and crushingly vague and distant. What could he do now?

In dread despair he glanced about, amazed at the prodigious numbers of scowling men who hurried by, obviously intent upon the commencement of a campaign for revenge.

Then Hero Giles turned his scarred, warlike face, now set in granite lines. "Come, Friend Nelson, my uncle Anthony bids me take thee direct to the presence of His Serene Splendor, where he lies encamped at Cierum, by the shores of Lake Copias. There he marshals the army of Atlans for a march through the hot country on Jezreel. I tell thee, thou hast come in stirring times. From Heraclea, Thebes, Ys and Mayda will come the Phalanxes. Once and forever we will deal the dogs of Jarmuth a final blow."

VICTOR NELSON never forgot the hours that followed. Issuing at a fast trot from the tube-road terminal, the two Heroes led the way to a vast structure, in which were stabled both the terrific allosauri and the podokesauri, those swift dinosaurs which seemed to serve the Atlanteans as horses. The dreadful hiss and snarl of these monsters resounded in his ears long before the stables came in sight, and that curious musky odor he had noted in the tunnel was sickeningly strong.

Everywhere he read signs of hurried preparations for war. Savage, surly allosauri were led from their stables, one by one, long necks writhing snakelike backwards and forwards. Then their keepers would, after a moment's tussle, secure huge leather muzzles over their gaping jaws, and the huge reptiles would be led waddling along on their hind legs out into a vast courtyard, there to hiss and strike at their nearest fellows.

"Thinkest thou couldst ride a podoko?" inquired Hero John, an anxious look on his handsome, friendly features. "They are difficult to manage—but swift in flight as the birds themselves!"

"I don't know," replied the aviator, "but I'm damn well going to try. If your Emperor can help me rescue Alden, the sooner we get started, the better."

For all his brave resolutions, his heart sank, as the green kilted keeper led forth three podokesauri. Nelson stared curiously at them as, hopping along, they drew near, to bare needle-sharp teeth at him while, brazen stirrups on either side jangled softly against their rough, scaly hides.

In evident high spirits the beasts snuffed the air and pawed with their tiny front legs excitedly, making their sharp talons glisten like polished steel. A bridle dangled from the mouth of each and a ring set in the thick upper lip served as a further means of control.

AT a sharp *"Oya!"* from an old and toothless keeper, the first podoko sank flat to the stone floor like a kneeling camel.

"A sturdy beast," commented Hero Giles, tightening his belt and securing the clasps to the emerald-green war cloak. "Here, Friend Nelson, thou hadst best don a helmet; the podokos on occasion throw back their heads and so might wound thee." So saying, he set foot in stirrup and swung up into a saddle which was built up high in the cantle to correct the sharp downward slope of the reptile's muscular back.

At a signal, Hero Giles' ugly mount rose to its height and shuffled awkwardly sidewise, as the old keeper, his eyes very wide and curious, led forward Nelson's charger.

"Look," said Hero John with a reassuring smile. "The chin strap buckles so—be sure it fits snug, else it will pound on thy head to the podoko's stride. If thou wouldst turn to the left, pull the rein so, to the right so, and if thou wouldst stop, pull strongly on the nose ring; 'tis not so difficult." He laid a friendly hand on Nelson's flannel clad shoulder. "How wilt thou manage thy curious weapon?" he inquired doubtfully. "Perhaps thou hadst best leave it behind."

There was a grim smile on Nelson's weary and wind burned features. "Not on your life, old son! This Winchester and I stick closer together than the Siamese twins."

Nelson thrust his foot into a heavy stirrup, eased his weight into the high peaked saddle and gripped the pommel, for though an excellent horseman, he had no clue as to what motion would ensue. It was wise he did so, for the podoko reared suddenly, almost flinging his rider from the saddle.

IMMEDIATELY Hero John mounted, raised his right hand and dealt his podoko a stinging slap on the fore-shoulder. The great reptile hissed in protest, but commenced to walk off with an awkward, hopping step. Nelson's mount followed suit.

Faster and faster ran the podokos, their long and scale-covered necks stretched far out ahead while their tails lifted correspondingly, much like that of an airplane about to take off.

"Whew! He must be doing all of forty-five," gasped Nelson, while the wind whistled about his ears and snapped madly at the yellow crest of his brazen helmet.

The ride which ensued remained forever fixed in the aviator's memory. Like so many shots from a gun the three podokos darted off out of the stables, past a gate guarded by a battery of retortii, whose red plumed cannoneers sprang to attention as the three strangely assorted riders sped out into the amber, perpetual light of Atlans.

Nelson, on finding his balance, looked about him to receive impressions of immensely tall structures, of

pyramids which, like the ziggurats of Sumaria, and Babylon, were surmounted with beautifully proportioned temples.

"Must be at least a million people in this burg of Heliopolis," thought Nelson, easing his Winchester.

Hour after hour they sped along, frequently overtaking detachments of troops. Twice they halted to change mounts, though the podokos seemed quite tireless.

At the end of five hours' furious riding, Nelson beheld a dense white cloud low on the horizon.

"What's that?" he demanded. "Fog?"

"No," Hero John informed him. "Yonder flows the Apidanus, the boiling river. Not far away to the left lies the frontier fortress of Cierum, where is encamped the Emperor, who will sit in judgment upon thee."

Nelson's heart sank. He had been so occupied with his fears for Alden that he had not dwelt upon his own precarious position.

SCARCELY half an hour elapsed, if Nelson's wrist watch were running correctly, before he reached the tremendous, swarming camp of Altorius XXII, Emperor of Atlans. Hero Giles proved to be a powerful talisman, for everywhere officers and men alike saluted respectfully and sank on one knee as he passed.

"Wait here," he snapped, as the podokos sank obediently to the dust, "Brother John, do thou guard Friend Nelson while I seek permission of His Serene Splendor to bring the Wanderer into the Presence."

Almost immediately the elder Atlantean returned, a frown on his scarred, rather brutal visage. "Come," he muttered, "but I fear for thee, Friend Nelson; His Splendor is in a savage mood —this raid hath stirred his ire beyond all bounds."

"Nothing like cheering up a patient before he goes into the operating room," thought Nelson, and quietly threw off the safety on his Winchester. "Six shots," he reflected. "Well, if I go, I reckon I'll take some damn good company along."

The aviator was led down a long passage, at every ten feet of which was posted an enormous scowling guard, whose spears, retortii and armor were painted a brilliant jade-green. Then a musical, deep-toned gong boomed twice, and Hero Giles halted before an exquisitely wrought door, which, without any apparent propulsion, silently slid back into the massive stone walls, revealing a huge, brilliantly lit circular chamber that was hung with emerald-green hangings. In the center, surrounded by a royal guard of nobles in splendidly jeweled armor, was reared a dais, upon which stood a throne that blazed with the most varied collection of diamonds that Nelson could ever have imagined.

"Down on your face," rasped Hero Giles as, in common with his brother, he knelt and then fell prostrate on the cool black marble floor.

"Damned if I will," murmured Nelson, and remained erect.

BOLT upright, he looked across the interval and found himself staring into the furious eyes of one of the handsomest men he had ever beheld. Gripping his Winchester in a kind of "port arms" position, he stood to attention—by some curious kink of the brain reverting to his military days. And so the two men, different as day and night, faced each other. Altorius XXII clad in robes of scarlet, and a glittering cuirasse that glowed like the evening sun. His yellow head was truly splendid, reminiscent of that of a young Roman Emperor. The hair, like that of the Hudsonian Heroes, was blond, curly and close cropped. Yes, thought the awed but self-contained American, there was something genuinely imperial about the Emperor's aquiline visage, for a high intelligent forehead and piercing blue eyes dominated a strong mouth, which was marred by a decidedly cruel twist at the cor-

ners. On him, also, was set the stamp of Sir Henry Hudson's dauntless race.

"Put him in a business suit and a soft gray hat," mused Nelson, "and you would find a dozen like him in any of London's best clubs."

"Down on thy face, sirrah!" Outraged, the Emperor's voice rang like the peal of a brazen trumpet through the great pillared audience chamber. The nearest guardsmen held themselves ready, hand on sword hilt.

"No." Nelson's shaggy black head went back as he found his tongue at last. "No, Your Majesty. In America we have our own way of showing respect for authority. I'm an American and, with all respect, I'll salute you as one."

So saying, his hand flicked up in a sharp military salute to the visor of that Atlantean helmet which he still wore.

"All damn foolishness," he silently told himself. "I feel like the lead in a ten, twenty, thirty melodrama. But I suppose it's got to be done."

THE Emperor's teeth gleamed in a half snarl as he sprang with Jovian wrath to his feet.

"Dog! How darest thou bandy words with us?"

"Have mercy!" hoarsely pleaded Hero John as he lay on the floor. "Have mercy, oh Splendor! He is but an ignorant wanderer from the Ice World."

It appeared that the young Hero was something of a favorite, for the masterful, thunder-browed Emperor checked himself and, still glowering, settled back on the diamond throne.

"Ye have my permission to enter and approach."

Whereupon, Hero Giles arose and, with many black looks at his guest, strode forward to briefly explain his presence.

Nelson felt Altorius' blazing blue eyes search his face.

"Then he whom the dog-born Jereboam captured was thy friend?"

"Yes," replied Nelson with dignity, "my best friend. Alden and I have traveled and wandered all over the world together."

"Over the world? The Ice World?" Altorius seemed interested, for he leaned forward, muscle corded arms very brown against the frosty brilliance of the stones studding his throne. He flipped back a scarlet cloak and bent a searching look on the straight, unafraid figure below.

Impatient to reach a decision, Nelson forebore to amplify the Emperor's assumption that the outside world was all ice and snow.

"Yes," he said, "from the land of America. I've spoken with Hero Giles, Your Majesty's Captain-General."

"So, then, no doubt, he has told you of the law of our country?" Altorius' white teeth shown again in the depths of his short, curling beard.

"Perhaps." Nelson was vague, wishing no further amplification.

"The law of Atlans," pronounced the Emperor with a frown, "states that a stranger must prove his worth to the State, else he must be put to death. Thank thou thy gods that thou hast not fallen into the hands of the Lost Tribes, for assuredly thou would perish miserably, as must thy comrade."

"WHAT is the law of Jarmuth?" inquired Nelson, his mind furiously at work.

"Their law states that the stranger within their gates must perish on the altar of Beelzebub, Jarmuth's blood-hungry demon god." A momentary expression of sadness crept into the Emperor's blue eyes and he beat a square, powerful hand on the arm of his throne. "Aye, blood-hungry! Lack-a-day! But yesterday, six of our fairest maidens crossed the boiling river, never to return."

Nelson was about to speak when from outside came the blast of a trumpet. The assembled Atlanteans started, paused, and remained silent, listening intently.

Hero Giles looked up, a light kindling in his deep-set eyes. "Yon was an Israelite trumpet."

As the words left his lips there came a hurried rapping at the portal, whereupon the guards sprang forward.

"Bid them enter." Altorius seemed strangely tense and uneasy.

Quietly the door rolled back as before, revealing an Atlantean whose eyes rolled with alarm. He hurried forward and flung himself on the floor at the Emperor's sandaled feet.

"Harken, oh Serene Splendor! Waiting without is an embassy from his Majesty of Jarmuth. They bear words for thine Imperial Highness."

"Now, by Saturn! Here's insolence—at an hour such as this!" With a furious swirl of his scarlet cloak Altorius leaped to his feet, hand on the ivory handle of his sword, which, to Nelson's amazement was not of bronze, but of good, blue-gray steel.

"I'll bet it's old Sir Henry's original pet sticker," he thought.

"Bring on these dogs of Israel," growled Altorius. "They shall die!"

"Gently, gently, oh Splendor," murmured Hero John. "Our full force is not yet camped on the Plains of Posiedon."

"Nay! Have the rogues flayed alive!" was the advice of the hot-headed elder brother. He, like the Emperor, was scowling and livid with fury.

PRESENTLY there appeared four men, stalwart warriors as totally different in aspect from the Atlanteans as humans might be. The two races were alike only in splendid physical proportions and human figures. They, the Jarmuthians, were black haired and dark skinned, whereas the Atlanteans, with the exception of Sir Henry's progeny, were red headed. Truculently the half naked ambassadors strode over the polished floor, which reflected their rude images. Their hairy chests, arms and legs afforded a sharp contrast to the neat Atlantean nobles, who drew back with expressions of disgust.

"Good God!" gasped Nelson in lively surprise. "A bunch of the boys from Seventh Avenue!"

It was true: each Jarmuthian clearly betrayed his Hebraic origin in huge, fleshy nose and pendulous lower lip, so characteristic of the Semitic race. They were fierce, shaggy fellows, naked from the waist up save for a kind of jointed body armor, reminiscent of a Roman legionnaire's. Their long abundant blue-black hair was either plaited or flowed uncut over splendidly muscled shoulders. Their beards on the other hand were short and frizzed into tight curls in the Assyrian manner. On each man's head was set a highly polished, pointed casque of copper, surmounted in each instance by the six-pointed star of Solomon. Otherwise the brutal looking emissaries wore nothing but dirty, food-spotted kilts and rough hide sandals secured by thongs.

WITH all the insolence and self assurance of conquerors in the presence of slaves the four jet-eyed ambassadors swaggered up to the diamond throne. Then the foremost briefly inclined his head towards Altorius in a grudging salute and began to speak in deep, resonant tones.

From that point Nelson could understand nothing of the conversation as it was carried on in the guttural and unintelligible language of that lost realm, but, from time to time Hero John found opportunity to translate an occasional phrase.

Darker and darker grew the brows of the gorgeously attired Emperor and his eagle-visaged Captain-General as they listened to the pompous oratory of the foremost Jarmuthian, and in dark fury more than one Atlantean noble half drew his sword when the speaker fell silent at last.

"He said," the younger Atlantean whispered, "that Jereboam is no longer satisfied with six maidens. Beelzebub demands a further offering of six more damsels to be delivered before the third division of time on the morrow.

By Saturn! The insolence of these besotted swine passes all tolerance!"

From the Atlantean Emperor's outraged negative gestures, Nelson surmised that Altorius was making an emphatic refusal and even adding some vicious threat. The foremost Jarmuthian slapped huge dirty hands on armored hips and fell to laughing with an insolence that would have provoked a rabbit.

FORGETTING dignity and self-control, Altorius, in a single tigerish sprang from his throne and knocked the mocker senseless with a powerful blow to the jaw. Then, spurning the fallen Jarmuthian with a sandaled foot, the Atlantean fixed blazing eyes upon the three other ambassadors who, nothing daunted, closed up, muttering savagely in their frizzed black beards, while their hands sought the spot where swords would normally have hung.

"Nice right to the jaw," commented Nelson with a grin. "He's still English enough to use his fists." He turned to Hero John, who stood with an expression of horror on his comely features. "What caused the row?"

"Verily, our plight is grave indeed. That braggart dog threatened to march on Heliopolis in the first division of morning, and,"—Hero John's lips compressed into a hopeless, taut expression —"our reinforcing phalanxes can never arrive in time to defend Cierum at that hour. Should the defense fail, as it must—since they outnumber us three to one for the nonce—it would cost us many thousands of men to stay the blood-hungry hordes of Jereboam once freed on the great plain.

Like a star shell bursting on a cloudy night came the inception of an idea.

"Here," cried Nelson, "I've an idea! Maybe I can fix a stall until the rest of your boys do a General Phil Sheridan and get here."

Hero John's blue eyes widened uncomprehendingly. "What?" he demanded. "What dost thou propose?"

NELSON'S hand crept to his head, for the unaccustomed weight and heat of the helmet made it itch. "You say these bright boys from over the border want to chow six more girls? Am I right?"

"Yea, oh Friend Nelson, they demand the victims to-morrow morn, else they advance."

"All right." Nelson was thinking fast now, a dreadful vision of Richard Alden stretched for sacrifice on the brass altar of Beelzebub ever floating before his aching eyes. "Tell those Semites that they can have those six girls *if* they can take them away from me."

A puzzled frown creased the younger Hero's brow and he tugged thoughtfully at his scant yellow beard. "Prithee pardon me, but I do not comprehend."

"All right, get this now! Tell the Jarmuthians that they can send six of their biggest and best scrappers, one for each girl. If they can take any one of those girls away from me, they take them all—taking me as well—and we'll all get the works in Jezreel together. But, on the other hand, if I kill their six champions, then Alden is returned unharmed, the six girls come home and the six other girls come back too—and there'll be no more hostages. I don't think they'll agree to or even consider surrendering Your Princess, Altara. I'm sorry I can't accomplish that, too. But if I can stop this annual tribute, it won't be so bad, will it?"

ROUNDER and rounder grew the Atlantean's eyes, and he gaped like a school boy in a side show.

"What sayest thou? Thou alone to overcome six of their best warriors? Nay, but this is folly! Moonshine! What knowest thou of their weapons?"

"Nothing," admitted Nelson, "but I *do* know Brother Winchester here." He patted the smooth stock. "He's mighty persuasive, properly handled."

"But they are armored! They have

the fungus bombs, the light retortii and the javelin!"

"Righto!" agreed Nelson a trifle carelessly, "but you don't know what this old boy can do when he's put to it. Well?"

"By Saturn!" An uncertain ring crept into the Atlantean Prince's voice. "A moment, while I address His Splendor."

"I'm a fool, a damn fool!" thought Nelson. "Still, it's Alden's only chance —unless the Jarmuthians've got some trick I'm not on to, I ought to stand a fighting chance." Meanwhile Emperor and Captain-General drew to one side, listening to Hero John's impassioned oratory. That the idea met with disapproval, Nelson quickly recognized from the incredulous, even contemptuous, glances Altorius shot at him. Leaving the four sneering Jarmuthians under guard of the nobles, the Emperor came striding impatiently over the inlaid floor.

"What madness is this?" he demanded harshly. "Dost thou realize what would hang upon thy skill? If thou shouldst fail, our annual hostage for the divine Altara would be twelve instead of six of our maidens. Further, the dog-conceived Jereboam would wax unbearably overweening and insolent. Nay, there is too much at hazard! Though outnumbered we will give battle in the morning."

"Yes?" demanded Nelson, in turn impatient. "A fine chance you'd stand! Why, less than half of your army is here at Cerium and Hero John tells me that the enemy have massed their entire forces on the salient of Posiedon. Isn't that so?"

ALTORIUS' handsome brow darkened. "Aye," he admitted, "but our reinforcing corps will come up before the third hour of the third division."

Here Hero Giles broke in and, speaking with the quick, impassioned tones of one whose reactions are violent, pled for confidence in the American. "Nay, fair cousin," he replied, casting a sidewise look at the Jarmuthians standing in muttered colloquy with their leader, who had now gotten to his feet and was angrily dabbing the blood from his chin with the hem of his yellow kiltlike garment, "I saw with mine own eyes what miracles Friend Nelson doth perform with his curious noise-making retortii. If Jereboam falls upon us ere our regiments are marshaled, then, verily, are we doomed. We have no choice but to play for time. Harken to the counsel of Hero John! Methinks this stranger from the Ice World is no braggart. He will fight well. If he loses he dies horribly—that he knows. The thought will strengthen his arms, and if he wins—!"

Then broke in Nelson firmly. "If I win I must have the word of Your Majesty that Alden and I are to be afforded all help and free passage to that place where your soldiers captured my friend. Is that understood?"

Altorius' blue eyes shifted and there was a slight hesitation in his manner. Then, coming to a decision, he whirled and extended his hand.

"Good, 'tis agreed," he said. "On my head be it. Have patience while Hero Giles confers with these outlandish dogs."

It was with intense interest that the anxious aviator watched the ensuing conference. He could see the four Jarmuthians listening, dark eyes restlessly flitting back and forth, and their mouths twisted into contemptuous half snarls. Then, as Nelson's offer was made clear, a look of cunning seemed to creep into the eyes of the leader. He asked for clarification of several points, then, being informed of the details, his thick lips, parted in an evil, crafty grin.

TAKEN aback at the suspiciously ready acquiescence of the enemy, Hero Giles turned about. "They agree," he translated, "that, should Friend Nelson win, they will return to their

own land, they will forfeit the annual tribute forever and return the other stranger unharmed. They speak fair, but I fear—" He bit his lips in perplexity. "These dogs, who talk with the forked tongues of serpents, plan some snare, some cunning trickery."

"Repeat the terms." Altorius seemed gripped with apprehension too. "Let all be clearly understood: at the third division of morning will the wanderer fight six warriors. No more and no less."

This was agreed and reaffirmed. Then, with an insolent, triumphant laugh, the Jarmuthian delegation whirled about and stalked from the room, their dark greaved legs flashing in military unison over the polished floor.

"'Tis done," quoth Hero Giles gloomily. "The encounter will take place on the plain of Gilboa at the third hour of the third division. And may Saturn help us if thy might fails, Friend Nelson! For then surely will the hordes of Jarmuth despoil us and there will come a desolation and a darkness upon the Empire of Atlans."

CHAPTER V

IT seemed incredibly soon that Victor Nelson found himself striding out from the serrated ranks of the Atlantean army which, drawn up in a rough diamond formation, looked discouragingly small in comparison to that vast sea of helmets twinkling ominously across the plain of Poseidon amid a haze of bright yellow dust which climbed lazily into the breathless heavens. The Jarmuthian army, numbering perhaps sixty or seventy thousand effective troops, lay encamped in a great salient formed by a convolution of the Apidanus and formed the only Jarmuthian tract of the great valley lying south of the boiling river.

Like low-lying snow drifts, the sheen of the enemy tents struck Nelson's eye as he strode over the bright green turf to battle for Richard Alden's life.

"There was something back of those nasty grins of the ambassadors," he reflected. "I wonder what deviltry they're cooking up?"

He glanced at a stalwart Atlantean herald who, nervous in the extreme, clutched his brazen, dolphin-shaped horn and followed in the American's wake together with a sad little company. Weeping, moaning and dressed in plain black robes marched six really lovely girls—they who would perish on Beelzebub's altar if Nelson failed. Bitter were the looks of the guards as they secured the hands of the victims and many the hopeful look cast at the impassive American when they turned back, leaving the helpless girls to their fate.

The ground where the one-sided duel was to take place was marked off by means of little yellow flags on a level plain perhaps a quarter of a mile long and wide. Arriving on the nearest border Nelson briefly motioned the herald to halt.

"Might as well start shooting at the best range possible, and beat their steam throwers," he decided. "Wish to the devil I'd a few more cartridges. Only thirteen shots between me and Beelzebub's altar in Jezreel, so I'd better not miss. All right, son, toot your horn."

WITH his thumb he gestured the command, whereupon the Atlantean nodded eargerly and, filling his chest, set horn to lips to blow a long, strident note that rang harshly, boldly out over the great plain.

While the notes of the challenge rang out, Nelson's eyes turned back to regard the Atlantean array and detected, far in the rear, a huge pillar of dust which must mark the progress of the Atlantean reinforcements. Would they arrive at Cierum in time? Then his eyes sought that spot where Altorius and his staff sat anxiously on their podokos, watching intently the impending struggle. Very clearly the flash of their armor came to him.

"I guess, like the girls back there, they're kind of nervous and jumpy," thought Nelson. "Well, I don't blame them. I've had quieter moments myself."

Having blown three blasts, the Atlantean herald saluted; then, with disconcerting haste, made his way back to the ranks of his fellows some two hundred yards away.

From the Jarmuthian army came an answering blast. Nelson cast a last look on the Atlantean army, breathlessly awaiting the impending duel. There was the allosauri corps on the far left; he could see the chimeric monsters' long, repulsive necks writhing endlessly back and forth through the air as they squealed and tugged strongly at their restraining chains. On the right were stationed perhaps ten thousand podokesons, their slender, yellow-shafted lances swaying like a sapling forest in the distance. In the center were eleven thousand protection infantry, green-crested and armed with compact tanks of blue maxima vapor, fungus bombs and swords. Behind them, and corresponding to heavy infantry, were ranged some twenty thousand blue-plumed hoplites, eagerly fingering the brazen hoses of their death dealing portable retortii.

NELSON had no time to further study the array, for he whirled about as from the Atlantean army arose a deep, horrified shout. He stood paralyzed, his jaw slack. For there, waddling slowly forward, came the most fantastic huge creature imaginable. Unspeakably repellant and horrible, it stood on short legs thick as mature trees, to tower at least thirty-five feet above the ground at the fore-shoulders! An immense reptilian neck some twenty-five feet long weaved continuously back and forth, while a surprisingly small, bullet-shaped head emitted rumbling grunts.

"Great God!" gasped the horrified aviator, and felt the ground sway under him. "It must be ninety feet long!"

Paralyzed by a dreadful fascination he watched the ungainly, hill-like reptile shuffle ponderously forward and realized that, high on its back, was fixed a small fort, rather like those howdahs or boxes which are fastened to the backs of elephants. Chilled with the nearness of death, Nelson counted six mail-clad warriors in the howdah. Then the true import of the Jarmuthians' evil jest struck him with full force.

"Six men, they said. And six men there are—but the treacherous devils mounted them on that walking hillside! Guess Altorious can kiss his six girls good-by right now. Poor Alden! Well, I did my best—a rotten trick."

AT that moment he felt as an ant must feel on beholding the approach of a human. It was terrifying, the inexorable advance of that colossal, fantastic monster. From behind he could hear the infuriated shouts of the Atlantean army. They knew even he could not hope to withstand the murderous onslaught of the beast now entering the duelling space.

On came the diplodocus, its vast warty tail trailing over the ground and raising a heavy column of dust, while its mud smeared sides bore out Hero Giles' statement that here was one of those semi-aquatic titans from the steaming swamps of Jarmuth.

"Hell! Poor Alden's as good as finfinished now! What a fool I was to think I could save him!"

Obedient to an overwhelming fear, Nelson whirled to flee, then stopped, as, from the depths of his being, a stronger power forbade him to desert his friend to certain death.

"Range two hundred and fifty yards," he estimated and, whipping up the Winchester, sighted full at the ponderous creature's slimy snake-like head. When the recoil jarred his shoulder, Nelson dropped the barrel an inch or so to watch. Nothing happened. The great beast was advancing as before, its incredibly long neck weaving steadily

back and forth as though to snuff the air.

"Hell!"

Struck by a sudden thought, he snatched a cartridge from his pocket and, with that strength which comes to men in their hour of mortal peril, wrenched out the metal-jacketed bullet, to reinsert it backwards into the brass cartridge case.

Meanwhile the vast brute had drawn nearer, crushing flat a young oak in its path as easily as though it had been a wheat stalk.

"Maybe this dum-dum will do some good," panted Nelson. "If it doesn't, nothing will stop it!"

AGAIN he sighted until, finding those small, orange red eyes in line with his sight, he fired. This time the gray-brown monster uttered a titantic bellow of rage, halted, and began shaking its clumsy blunt head.

"Hit it, by God!" exulted Nelson, and seized the momentary respite to slip two fresh cartridges into the Winchester's magazine.

But, to his inexpressible dismay, the monster presently resumed its ponderous progress while the Jarmuthians in the howdah uttered taunting yells that reached him faintly, while the sun flares glinted on their brandished swords and lances. One of them plucked a fungus grenade from his belt and flung it with all his might in Nelson's direction. The missile fell to the earth far short of its destination and seemed to break rather than explode, at the same time expelling that deadly, greenish-yellow vapor which, blown away by a strong wind, fortunately came nowhere near the doomed aviator.

"Oh! You will?"

Nelson sighted swiftly at the grenade-thrower and fired, whereupon the Jarmuthian, some hundred and fifty yards distant, spun crazily about, flung both arms towards the amber-yellow sky and toppled from the howdah, for all the world like a diver in quest of pearls.

From both breathless armies rose a terrific shout. Accustomed as they were to the visible destruction of the retortii, this noisy yet invisible death was appalling.

But Nelson's agonized attention was not on the assembled armies, for nearer came the mountainous diplodocus, its lumbering strides making the howdah sway like a ship in a gale and preventing use of the portable retortii.

NELSON planted both feet, took fresh grip on his waning courage and shot again, this time aiming at a gigantic, black bearded warrior who seemed to be training one of those portable retortii upon him.

Again the Winchester cracked and this time the black bearded man sank from sight back into the howdah, while his companions, uttering vengeful shouts, tossed more fungus bombs at the lone heroic figure barring their progress towards the six bound and shrieking maidens.

Towering thrice as high as the largest African elephant, the diplodocus was now but seventy-five yards away. He had hit it, that Nelson could tell, for a large shower of blood sprayed from the monster's neck. Then, uttering a dispairing curse, he sent a shot smacking squarely into the left shoulder, at the base of that mastlike neck with fervent hope of finding the heart. But the heavy bullet bothered the cyclopean reptile no more than a sting of a mosquito.

On, on it came. In another minute it must stamp out Victor Nelson's life beneath feet as large as hogsheads.

"Damn!"

Nelson snapped the ejector lever, throwing out the spent cartridge.

"No use," he whispered, "can't phaze that hill of meat! But I might as well kill all of those bloody cannibals I can."

With amazing speed and accuracy he picked off two of the remaining Jarmuthians, whose shining, bronze armor could nowise withstand the wicked im-

pact of modern nickel-jacketed bullets. One of the stricken men for a moment dangled with the last of his strength from one of the chains securing the howdah to the enormous creature's back, then tumbled heavily some forty feet to the earth.

Only two shots more in the magazine—! Nelson suddenly found himself very cool. "Two shots and then—"

He was conscious of that great, snakelike head darting viciously in his direction. A huge, slobbering mouth, studded with teeth a foot long, yawned redly before him like a nightmare incarnate, blotting out consciousness of all else. Then Victor Nelson, fighting to control his strumming nerves, deliberately sighted into a great, orange colored eye, saw the narrow black iris over the Winchester's front sight and knew the huge warty head was not ten feet away.

HE pressed the trigger and never heard the report, but felt the blast of a furnace-hot breath in his face —a breath that stank like the foul reek of burning rubber.

With a detached sense of surprise he saw the eye miraculously and dreadfully disintegrate; then, as the bitter smell of burned cordite stung his nostrils, he sprang violently sidewise to find himself staring up at the howdah, now towering at least forty feet above.

The next few moments were indescribable. Horrible roars and bellows, loud as those of a thousand angered bulls, shattered the air. The diplodocus halted, stunned by pain and the partial loss of eyesight; then, its infinitesimal brain becoming gripped with fear, it plunged and lumbered sidewise, nearly shaking the warriors from the howdah, where they clung for dear life. Nelson was barely able to avoid the sweep of the powerful tail as the diplodocus wheeled about on hind legs, reeled and started blindly back towards the Jarmuthian ranks. Suddenly it stood stock still, shaking with superelephantine motions. Then, for all the world like a balky mule, it sank to the earth and cowered there, despite the frantic efforts of the surviving Jarmuthians to stir it to obedience.

By the strong amber light of the sun flare Nelson had a vision of the last two warriors swinging in apelike agility to the ground. They were giants, those two men of Jarmuth, and their conical helmets added additional stature. One of them, shouting an unintelligible taunt, reached for his belt to snatch out a fungus bomb, but Nelson, dropping on one knee, sent a bullet crashing between the Jarmuthian's scowling eyes. Even as he fell, the last of the six champions unwisely ignored his retortii and frantically sprang forward, razor-edged sword upraised.

Nelson frantically worked the ejector lever but only an empty click resulted! His heart sank. "Hell! the magazine's empty!"

HE had just time to swing the Winchester about and grasp its barrel as the Jarmuthian, with a loud shout, sprang in, slashing viciously at Nelson's unprotected neck. Using the clubbed rifle like a baseball bat, the American struck out with the strength of despair. There came a resonant clang as blade and barrel encountered each other. Steel is ever stronger than bronze, so Nelson had the satisfaction of seeing the Jarmuthian's sword blade break squarely in two near the hilt.

Horrified, the black bearded warrior glanced at the empty hilt in his hand but, courageous to the end, sprang in like a tiger to grapple with that small, agile man in khaki and serge.

"You would—eh?" gasped Nelson.

Putting all his strength behind a blow he whirled up the heavy Winchester, struck out and felt the solid walnut stock smash fair and square on the conical helmet. Like an eggshell the bronze helm broke and the six-pointed star above went spinning off into the dust. As a tree sways before it falls beneath a forester's ax, so the

dark Jarmuthian giant tottered, while the wide dusty plain of Poseidon echoed with a rumbling, incredulous shout.

"There," choked Nelson, incredulous to be still alive, "I guess that'll be about all for to-day."

But he was wrong. From the ranks of Jarmuth rose a terrible, ominous cry and at the same time there broke out the sibilant hiss of a thousand retortii. From the Atlantean army came an answering yell and Nelson turned to race back to the shelter of Altorius' bodyguard, pausing but to arouse the terrified hostages. Swiftly he cast loose their bonds and pointed to the nearest detachment of Atlanteans. Sobbing with joy the six girls fled for dear life just as the first of the allosauri went racing over the plains. Screaming, allpowerful and uncanny war dogs, they bounded grotesquely high in the air, plunging straight towards the Jarmuthian ranks which greeted them with a searing, billowing blast of their retortii. Though dozens of the terrible creatures fell kicking and writhing beneath the scalding discharge of the retortii, the main body, perhaps forty or fifty in number, sprang like rending fiends into the dense packed masses of Jarmuthian infantry.

OF the ensuing battle, Nelson had but the most confused recollections. The dominating impression was that the fray was awesome, horrible beyond power of description. He recalled feeding the five remaining cartridges into the magazine, then clapping on an Atlantean noble's helmet. With Hero John at his side he joined in a furious headlong charge of the podoko corps.

Like a vast glittering wedge the gallant Atlantean lancers advanced under shelter of the blue maxima vapor which, discharged by the protectons or light infantry, dispelled the scalding steam clouds launched from the Jarmuthian portable retortii.

"Halor vàn!" Hero John shouted the Atlantean war cry. "Halor vàn! Come, Friend Nelson, this day shall the treacherous swine of Jarmuth drown in their own blood! Halor vàn!"

Nelson replied nothing. He was too busy drawing a bead on a gorgeously arrayed enemy officer who appeared to be directing the defence.

Faster and faster rushed the podokos, forty, fifty miles an hour, a carnate thunderbolt hurled straight at the enemy center. Under a hot fire of grenades dozens of the lancers fell and once, when a fungus bomb broke near by, Nelson saw half a dozen Atlanteans tumble from their saddles, the hideous yellow growths already sprouting from nostrils, mouth and ears. The turmoil became deafening, indescribable—like the roar of a crowded subway.

The American had a brief glimpse of a mountainous diplodocus assailed by half a dozen hissing, shrieking allosauri who, employing jaws and claws, ripped great, shuddering chucks of flesh from the agonized and unwieldly monster on whose back the frantic Jarmuthians fought with terrible ferocity.

AS agile as grasshoppers, those fierce war dogs ripped and worried their prey. One of them clung like a bulldog to the doomed diplodocus' head, though the twenty-foot neck writhed and whirled frantically in effort to shake it loose. Another allosaurus, whining with eagerness, actually clambered up the back of an assailed giant only to fall back under the blast of a retortii mounted in the howdah. Bathed in live steam, with bones showing through its melting, quivering flesh, the allosaurus collapsed backwards, but another instantly took its place and, gaining its goal with a terrific leap, made a shambles of the howdah, tearing the men in it apart as a lion does an antelope.

Nelson found himself very busy. The charging podokesos were now in the midst of the Jarmuthian heavy infantry, slashing down at a maze of yelling, black-bearded Semitic faces.

Once Nelson was nearly speared, shooting his assailant just as the lance glimmered over his heart. Again he saw the Atlantean hoplites beaten back amid a pestilential fog of fungus gas which stretched them in kicking, loathsome heaps on the dusty plain. The uproar became terrific, indescribable, as the whistling screams of the allosauri and the saurean bellows of the diplodoci rose above the shouts of the soldiery to fill the dust-laden air with a dreadful clamor. The battle now swayed critically; a feather's weight on either side and one army would roll back in red, irretrievable ruin. It was the psychological instant. Nelson sensed it unerringly.

"Look!" shouted Hero John, dashing a rivulet of blood from his eyes, "there fights the dog-begotten Jereboam himself! Halor vàn! Smite, ye soldiers of Atlans! Smite!"

Following the line of the outstretched hand, Nelson caught a glimpse of an enormous, eagle nosed warrior who, clad in gleaming, diamond studded harness, fought like a paladin of old. Powerful as a dark Ares the sable browed Jereboam raged among the dismayed Atlantean hoplites, beating them to earth with terrible ferocity.

IT was a long shot, one he might readily have been forgiven in missing but with the speed of thought Victor Nelson sprang from his podoko, dropped on one knee behind a pile of corpses and, uttering a fervent prayer, fired full at Jereboam's black head.

The nearest combatants drew back momentarily at the unfamiliar thunder of the report and fell silent while the groans and shrieks of the wounded rose loud. As a man looking through many thickness of glass, so Nelson saw Jereboam reel on his splendidly caparisoned podoko, clasp both hands to his forehead and sink to earth.

Hero Giles, somewhere far in the Atlantean van, saw what transpired and capitalized it with the inspiration of a genius.

"Jereboam is dead!" he shouted in ringing tones, and flashed his red stained sword. "Woe to Jarmuth this day! Smite, ye sons of Atlans. Woe to Jarmuth—Jereboam is fallen!"

And smite hard the reinforced Atlanteans did. Filled with a new courage they advanced so determinedly that the disconcerted and dismayed Jarmuthians broke and fled in a disastrous, panic-stricken rout back over the plain of Poseidon towards the boiling river.

The ground was already carpeted with dead and with abandoned equipment, when fresh packs of allosauri were loosed on the fleeing Jarmuthians to wreak havoc indescribable and, ere long, only the triumphant, panting Atlanteans remained on the field.

CHAPTER VI

THERE was music and high revelry in the fortress of Cierum that night, and Victor Nelson, embarrassed and flushed with the extravagent adoration of all Atlans, sat by the Emperor Altorius' side waiting, watching for the appearance of a humbled Jarmuthian delegation.

"Never since the world began has there been such a hero in Atlans!" cried Altorius, his face more Roman than ever. "Prithee tarry amongst us, Hero Nelson. Thou shalt be as my brother. A marble palace shalt thou have and twenty wives, each fair as those damsels which thou hast, by thy might, rescued from the profane altar of the fiend, Beelzebub!"

"Thanks," laughed Nelson, and drained a goblet of tawny wine. "I'd be delighted to stay, but the point is — He broke off short, for there came a sudden tramp of feet at the door of the great hall and there, just visible above the green crests of the royal guards, he recognized that pale, drawn face which had haunted him ever since he had returned to find the abandoned aeroplane.

"Dick!" he shouted. "Dick Alden!"

"Nelson!"

With that same irresistible form which had won a certain November classic for Harvard, Richard Alden bucked and plunged through a double rank of startled guards and came running across the marble floor, his eyes lit with an unspeakable gladness.

"Nelson! Nelson!" he panted. "What in hell are you doing up there?"

"Oh!" replied the aviator with a joyous grin, "just visiting with my friend, the Emperor."

ALDEN halted, on his handsome features a curious mixture of surprise and delight. "The Emperor?" he stammered. "You sitting beside an Emperor?"

"Would it not seem so?" inquired Altorius with a low laugh.

"It would," chuckled Alden. "Victor Nelson, as I remember, always was a good politician."

"And," thought Nelson, "I'll have to be a damn sight better one to get us out of Atlans without injuring Altorius' feelings. I don't suppose he'll ever be able to realize that all the desirable things in the world don't lie in this valley."

Throngs of brilliantly armored and plumed officers and courtiers, some of them nursing wounds and bandaged heads, came up to hail the mighty wanderer who had subdued the might of Jarmuth.

Flushed and pleased, as is any normal man under well-earned praise, Nelson shook one wiry fist after another, while Alden chatted with the Emperor. Nobles, officers and courtiers all pressed close to fawn upon the new hero—but, far back in the council chamber, a group of dark robed priests were crowded together. Haranguing the priests was a fierce, white bearded old man who seemed to be arguing violently.

"Hum!" thought the American. "That's at least one outfit that doesn't like the way I part my hair. Wonder what devilment the priests are cooking up?"

HE was not long in finding out, for the black robed arch-priest suddenly left his group of underlings to boldly make his way forward, while princes, courtiers and warriors drew respectfully aside and bent their heads.

"Hail! All conquering Emperor!" The stern old man halted squarely before Altorius' gem encrusted throne, while Alden checked some remark to look curiously down upon the hawk-featured arch-priest.

Altorius flushed and the lines about his mouth tightened, from which Nelson guessed that there was more than a little bad blood between the spiritual and temporal heads of the empire.

"What wouldst thou, oh Heracles?"

"I would know why the all powerful Wanderer, of whom thou makest so much, did not rescue Princess Altara?"

The Emperor stiffened. "Her rescue, being impossible of accomplishment, was not nominated in the agreement," he said coldly. "The Wanderer has in full carried out his share—and so shall we. Honored and beloved of Atlans, these great warriors shall abide among us in peace."

Here Nelson thought it wise to dispel any illusions Altorius might entertain about their staying in Atlans. "No, oh Splendor: remember, our agreement was that, should I conquer the Jarmuthian champions, Alden and I were to be allowed to go free."

"Nay, oh Splendor," fiercely broke in the arch-priest, "permit them not to go. I tell thee the Princess Altara *must* be restored to Atlans! Else,"—a distinct note of threat crept into the old man's voice— "—else evil days shall fall upon this empire, and the line of Hudson will wither and fade."

Up sprang Altorius in a towering rage. "Sirrah! Dost dare make threats to thy leige lord?"

FIRE flashed from the young Emperor's bright blue eyes, and under their fierce glare the old man quailed and stepped back with eyes lowered.

"Altorius keeps his word," the Emperor thundered. "The strangers shall go, though all the black-robed kites in the realm say me nay. The word of a Hudsonian prince is as sure as the fire of Pelion. Get thee gone, rash priest!"

A long moment, the two strangely contrasting figures glared at each other, the young, splendid Emperor and the malevolent, withered old man.

"The Gods demand their daughter," cried Heracles in parting, "and woe to him who says them nay!"

With this parting shot, the arch-priest turned and, scarlet faced, stalked from the council room, while Altorius threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Come, oh ye Heroes, ye princes and captains! Come, let us make festival before these mighty wanderers go their way!"

Roar upon roar of enthusiasm echoed through the marble throne room, and Nelson would have felt wholly at ease had not that little knot of priests remained gathered like ill-omened carrion crows about the door. Muttering among themselves, they were watching him with a curious intentness that aroused deep misgivings in the American's mind, and it was with something like a sigh that he joined the procession forming to proceed to the triumphal feast on which the wealth and luxury of the whole empire of Atlans had been lavished.

(To be continued.)

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PHALANXES OF ATLANS

The Breath-Taking Conclusion of the Current Novel

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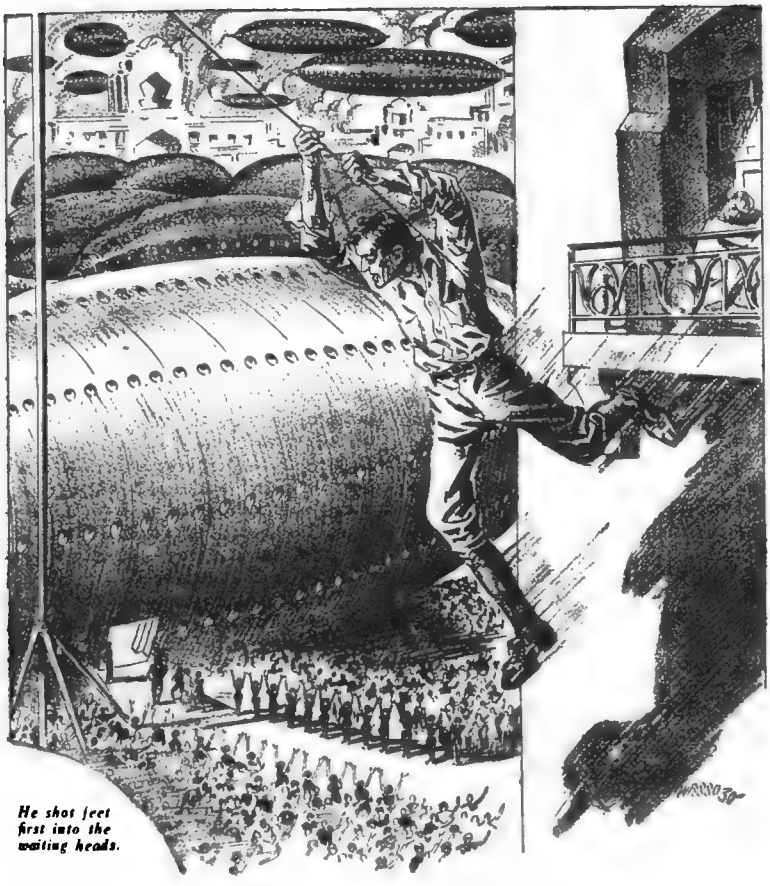
—And Others!



He shot feet first into the waiting heads.

The Pirate Planet

By Charles W. Diffin

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER XVII

THE little ship that Captain Blake had thrown with reckless speed through the skies over Washington, D. C., made history that day in the records of the earth. None, now, could doubt that here, at last, was the answer that the world had hoped for until hope had died. Unbelievable in its field of action, incredible in its wild speed, but real, nevertheless!—the countries of the earth were frantic in their acclaim. Only the men who formed the International Board of Defense

From Earth and sub-Venus converge a titanic offensive of justice on the unspeakable man-things of Torg.

failed to join in the enthusiasm. They sat by day and night in earnest conference on ways and means.

This little ship—so wonderful, and so inadequate! It was only a promise of what might come. There must be new designs made; men must learn to dream in new terms and set down their dreams in cold lines and figures on drafting boards. A cruiser of space must be designed, to mount heavy guns, carry great loads, absorb the stresses that must come to such a structure in flight and in battle. And above all, it must take the thrust of this driving force — new and tremendous — of which men knew so little as yet. And then many like it must be built.

The fuel must be prepared, and this, alone, meant new and different machinery, which itself must be designed before the manufacturing process could begin.

There was work to be done—a world of work!—and so few months in which to do it. The attack from the distant gun had long since ceased and the instruments of the astronomers showed the enemy planet shrinking far off in space. But it would return; there was only a year for preparation.

CAPTAIN BLAKE was assigned to the direction of design. An entire office building in Washington was vacated for his use, and in a few hours he rallied a staff of assistants who demanded the entire use of a telephone system that spread countrywide. And the call went out that would bring the best brains of the land to the task before them.

The windows of the building shone brightly throughout the nights when the call was answered, and engineers and draftsmen worked at fever heat on thrusts and stresses and involved mathematical calculations. And, while owners of great manufacturing plants waited with unaccustomed patience for a moment's talk with Blake, the white sheets on the drafting boards showed growing pictures of braces and struts and curved plates, of castings for gun mounts, and ammunition hoists. And the manufacturers were told in no uncertain terms exactly what part of this experimental ship they would produce, and when it must be delivered.

"If only we dared go into production," said Blake; "but it is out of the question. This first ship must demonstrate its efficiency; we must get the 'bugs' out of our design; correct our errors and be ready with a production schedule that will work with precision."

Only one phase of this proposed production troubled him; the manufacture must be handled all over the world. He talked with men from England and France, from Germany and Italy and a host of other lands, and he raged inwardly while he tried to drive home to them the necessity for handling the work in just one way—his way—if results were to be achieved.

The men of business he could convince, but his chief disquiet came from those whose thoughts were of what they termed "statesmanship," and who seemed more apprehensive of the power that this new weapon would give the United States of America than they were of the threat from distant worlds.

From his friends in high quarters came hints of the same friction, but he knew that the one demand Winslow had laid down was being observed: the secret of the mysterious fuel would remain with us. Winslow had shown little confidence in the countries of the old world, and he had sworn Blake to an agreement that his strange liquids—that new form of matter and substance — should remain with this country.

AND swiftly the paper ship grew. The parts were in manufacture, and arriving at the assembly plant in Ohio. Blake's time was spent there now, and he caught only snatches of sleep on a cot in his office, while he worked with the forces of men who

succeeded each other to keep the assembly room going night and day.

There was an enormous hangar that was designed for the assembling of a giant dirigible; it housed another ship now. Hardly a ship, yet it began to take form where great girders held the keel that was laid, and duralumin plates and strong castings were bolted home.

A thousand new problems, and innumerable vexing errors — the "bugs" that inhere with a new mechanical job —yet the day came when the ship was a thing of sleek beauty, and her thousand feet of length enclosed a maze of latticed struts where ammunition rooms and sleeping quarters, a chart room and control stations were cleverly interspaced. And above, where the great shape towered high in the big hangar, were the lean snouts of cannon, and recesses that held rapid-fire guns and whole batteries of machine guns for close range.

Rows of great storage batteries were installed, to furnish the first current for the starting of the ship, till her dynamos that were driven by the exhaust blast itself could go into action and carry on. And then—

An armored truck that ground slowly up under heavy guard to deliver two small flasks of liquid whose tremendous weight must be held in containers of thick steel, and be hoisted with cranes to their resting place within the ship. And Captain Blake, with his heart in his throat through fear of some failure, some slip in their plans—Captain Blake, of the gaunt, worn frame, and face haggard from sleepless nights—stood quietly at a control board while the great doors of the hangar swung open.

AT the closing of a switch the current from the batteries flowed through the two liquids, to go on in conductors of heavy copper to a generator that was heavy and squat and devoid of moving parts. Within it were electrodes that were castings of copper, and between them the miracle of regenerated matter was taking place.

What came to them as energy from the cables was transformed to a tangible thing—a vast bulk of gas, of hydrogen and oxygen that had once been water, and the pressure of the gas made a roaring inferno of the exhausts. A spark plug ignited it, and the heat of combustion added pressure to pressure, while the quivering, invisible live steam poured forth to change to vaporous clouds that filled the hangar.

The man at the control board stood trembling with knowledge of the power he had unleashed. He moved a lever to crack open a valve, and the clouds poured now from beneath the ship, that raised slowly and smoothly in the air. It hung quietly poised, while the hands that directed it sent a roaring blast from the great stern exhaust, and the creation of many minds became a thing of life that moved slowly, glidingly out into the sunlight of the world.

The cheers of crowding men, insane with hysterical emotion at sight of their work's fulfillment, were lost in the thunder of the ship. The blunt bow lifted where the sun made dazzling brilliance of her sweeping curves, and with a blast that thundered from her stern the first unit of the space forces of the Earth swept upward in an arc of speed that ended in invisibility. No enveloping air could hold her now; she was launched in the ocean of space that would be her home.

CAPTAIN BLAKE, the following day, sat in Washington before a desk piled high with telegrams of congratulation. His tired face was smiling as he replaced a telephone receiver that had spoken words of confidence and commendation from the President of the United States. But he pushed the mass of yellow papers aside to resume his examination of a well-thumbed folder marked: "Production Schedule." The real work was yet to be done.

It was only two short months later

that he sat before the same desk, with a face that showed no mark of smiles in its haggard lines.

His ship was a success, and was flying continuously, while men of the air service were trained in its manipulation and gunners received practice in three-dimensioned range finding and cruiser practice in the air. Above, in the airless space, they learned to operate the guns that were controlled from within the air-tight rooms. They were learning, and the ship performed the miracles that were now taken as matters of fact.

But production!

Captain Blake rose wearily to attend a conference at the War Department. He had asked that it be called, and the entire service was represented when he reached there. He went without preamble or explanation to the point.

"Mr. Secretary," he said, and faced the Secretary of War, "I have to report, sir, that we have failed. It is utterly impossible, under present conditions, to produce a fleet of completed ships.

"You know the reason; I have conferred with you often. It was a mistake to depend on foreign aid; they have failed us. I do not criticize them: their ways are their own, and their own problems loom large to them. The English production of parts has come through, or is proceeding satisfactorily, but the rest is in hopeless confusion. The Red menace from Russia is the prime reason, of course. With the Reds mobilizing their forces, we cannot blame her neighbors for preparing to defend themselves. But our program!—and the sure invasion that will come in six short months!—to be fighting among ourselves—it is damnable!"

HE paused to stare in wordless misery at the silent gathering before him. Then—

"I have failed," he blurted out. "I have fallen down on the job. It was my responsibility to get the cooperation that insured success. Let me step aside. Is there anyone now who can take up the work and bring order and results from this chaos of futility?"

He waited long for a reply. It was the Secretary of War who answered in a quiet voice.

"We must not be too harsh," he said, "in our criticism of our foreign friends, but neither should we be unfair to Captain Blake. You do yourself an injustice; there is no one who could have done more than you. The reason is here. He struck at a paper that he held in his hand. "Europe is at war. Russia has struck without warning; her troops are moving and her air force is engaged this minute in an attack upon Paris. It is a traitor country at home that has defeated us in our war with another world.

"I think," he added slowly, "there is nothing more that could have been done: you have made a brave effort. Let us thank you, Captain Blake, while we can. We will fight, when the time comes, as best we can; that goes without saying."

A blue and gold figure arose slowly to speak a word for the navy. "It is evident, by Captain Blake's own admission, that the proposed venture must fail. It has been evident to some of us from the start." It was a fighter of the old school who was speaking; his voice was that of one whose vision has dimmed, who sees but the dreams of impractical visionaries in the newer inventions, and whose reliance for safety is placed only in the weapons he knows.

"The naval forces of the United States will be ready," he told them, "and I would ask you to remember that we can still place dependence upon the ships that float in the water, and the forces who have manned them since the history of this country began."

CAPTAIN BLAKE had sprung to his feet. Again he addressed the Secretary for War.

"Mr. Secretary," he said, and there

was a fighting glint in his eyes, "I make no reply to this gentleman. His arm of the service will speak for itself as it has always done. But your own words have given me new hope and new energy. I ask you, Mr. Secretary, for another chance. The industrial forces of the United States are behind us to the last man and the last machine. I have talked with them. I know!

"We have only six months left for a prodigious effort. Shall we make it? For the safety of our country and the whole world let us attempt the impossible: go ahead on our own; turn the energy and the mind of this whole country to the problem.

"The great fleet of the world can never be. Shall we build and launch the Great Fleet of the United States, and take upon our own shoulders the burden and responsibility of defense?

"It cannot be done by reasonable standards, but the time is past for reason. Possible or otherwise, we *must* do it. We will—if you will back me in the effort!"

There was a rising discord of excited voices in the room. Men were leaping to their feet to shake vehement fists in the faces of those who wagged their heads in protest. The Secretary of War arose to still the storm. He turned to walk toward the waiting figure of Captain Blake.

"You can't do it," he said, and gripped the Captain by the hand; "you can't do it—but you may. This country has seen others who have done the impossible when the impossible had to be done. It's your job; the President will confirm my orders. Go to it, Blake!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE wires that bound the two man were removed, and McGuire and Sykes worked in agony to bring life back to the hands and feet that were swollen and blue. Then — red guards who forced them to stumble on their numbed legs, where darting pains made them set their lips tight — a car that went swiftly through the darkness of a tube to stop finally in another building—a room with metal walls, one window with a balcony beyond, high above the ground—a door that clanged behind them; and the two men, looking one at the other with dismayed and swollen eyes, knew in their hearts that here, beyond a doubt, was their last earthly habitation.

They said nothing—there was nothing of hope or comfort to be said—and they dropped soddenly upon the hard floor, where finally the heavy breathing and nervous starts of Professor Sykes showed that to him at least had come the blessed oblivion of exhausted sleep. But there was no sleep for Lieutenant McGuire.

There was a face that shone too clearly in the dark, and his thoughts revolved endlessly in words of reproach for his folly in allowing Althora's love to lead her to share his risk. From the night outside their window came a ceaseless clatter and hubbub, but to this he was oblivious.

Only with the coming of morning's soft golden light did McGuire know the reason for the din and activity that echoed from outside—and the reason, too, for their being placed in this room.

THEIR lives should end with the sailing of the fleet, and there, outside their window, were the ships themselves. Ships everywhere, as far as he could see across the broad level expanse, and an army of men who scurried like ants—red ones, who worked or directed the others, and countless blues and yellows who were loading the craft with enormous cargoes.

"Squawk, damn you!" said Lieutenant McGuire to the distant shrieking throng; "and I hope they're ready for you when you reach the earth." But his savage voice carried no conviction. What was there that Earth could do to meet this overwhelming assault?

"What is it?" asked Sykes. He roused from his sleep to work ginger-

ly at his aching muscles, then came and stood beside McGuire.

"They have put us here as a final taunt," McGuire told him. "There is the fleet that is going to make our world into a nice little hell, and Torg, the beast! has put us here to see it leave. Then we get ours, and they don't know that we know that."

"Your first way was the best," the scientist observed; "we should have done it then. We still can."

"What do you mean?" The flyer's voice was dull and lifeless.

Sykes pointed to the little balcony and the hard pavement below.

"Althora," he said, and McGuire winced at the name, "seemed to think that we were in for some exquisite torture. Here is the way out. It is a hundred-foot drop; they think we are safe; but they have been unintentionally kind."

"Yes," his companion agreed, "they don't know that we know of the torture. We will wait . . . and when I am sure that—Althora—is—gone . . . when there is nothing I can do to help—"

"Help?" queried the professor gently. "There is nothing now of help, nor anyone who can help us. We must face it, my boy; *c'est fini*. Our little journey is approaching its end."

THERE was no reply, and McGuire stood throughout the day to stare with eyes of smouldering hatred where the scurrying swarms of living things made ready to invade and infest the earth.

Food and water was pushed through the doorway, but he ate sparingly of the odd-colored fruits; the only thing that could hold his thoughts from the hopeless repetition of unanswerable "whys" was the sight of the fleet. And every bale and huge drum was tallied mentally as it passed before his eyes. The ships were being loaded, and with their sailing— But, no! He must not let himself think of that!

Throughout the day ships came and departed, and one leviathan, ablaze in scarlet color, sailed in to settle down where great steel arms enfolded it, not far from the watching men. Scarlet creatures in authority directed operations, and workmen swarmed about the great ship. Once McGuire swore softly and viciously under his breath, for he had seen a figure that could be only that of Torg, and the crowd saluted with upraised arms as the scarlet figure passed into the scarlet ship. This, McGuire knew, was the flagship that should carry Torg himself. Torg and—He paled at thought of the other name.

The only break in the long day came with the arrival of a squad of guards, who hustled the two men out into a passageway and drove them to another room, where certain measurements were taken. The muscular figures of the two were different from these red ones, but it was a moment before McGuire realized the sinister significance of the proceedings. Their breadth of shoulders, the thickness of their chests—what had these figures to do with their captivity? And then the flyer saw the measures compared with the dimensions of a steel cage. Its latticed shape could be endlessly compressed, and within, he saw, were lancet points that lined the ghastly thing throughout. Long enough to torture, but not to kill; a thousand delicate blades to pierce the flesh; and the instrument, it seemed, was of a size that could enclose the writhing, helpless body of a man.

Other unnamable contrivances about the room took on new significance with the knowledge that here was the chamber of horrors whose workings had been seen by Althora in the mind of their captor—horrors of which she could not speak.

MC GUIRE was sick and giddy as the guards led him roughly back to their prison room. And Professor Sykes, too, required no explanation of what they had seen.

The guards were many, and resistance was useless, but each man looked

silently at the other's desperate eyes when the metal cords were twisted again about their wrists, and their hands were tied securely to metal rings anchored in the wall beside the window.

"And there," said the flyer, "goes our last chance of escape. They were not as dumb as we thought: they knew how good a leap to the pavement would look after we had been in there."

"Less than human!" Sykes was quoting the comment of Althora's brother. "I think Djorn was quite conservative in his statement."

McGuire examined carefully the cords that tied his hands to the wall beside him. The knots were secure, and the metal ring was smooth and round. "I didn't know," he said, as he worked and twisted, "but there might be a cutting edge, but we haven't a chance. No getting rid of these without a wire cutter or an acetylene torch—and we seem to be just out of both."

Professor Skyes tried to adopt the other's nonchalant tone. "Careless of us," he began—then stopped breathless to press his body against the wall.

"It's there!" he said. "Oh, my God, if I could only get it, it might work—it might!"

"The battery," he explained to the man beside him, whose assumed indifference vanished at this suggestion of hope; "—the little battery that I used on the gun, to fire the explosive. It has an astounding amperage, and a voltage around three hundred. It's in my pocket—and I can't reach it!"

"You can't keep a good man licked!" McGuire exulted. "You mean that the current might melt the wire?"

"Soften it, perhaps, depending upon the resistance. Sykes refused to share the other's excitement. "But we can't get at it."

"We've got to," was the answer. "Move over this way." The man in khaki twisted his arms awkwardly to permit him to bend his body to one side, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as the strain forced the thin bonds into his wrists. But he brought his agonized face against the other's body, and gripped the fabric of Sykes' coat between his teeth.

THE twisting of his head raised the cloth an inch at a time, and despite Sykes' efforts to hold the garment with his elbow, it slipped back time and again. McGuire straightened at intervals to draw a choking breath and ease the strain upon his tortured wrists; then back again in his desperate contortions to worry at the cloth and pull and hold—and try again to raise the heavy pocket where a battery made sagging folds.

He was faint and gasping when finally the cloth was brought where the scientist's straining fingers could grasp it to writhe and twist in clumsy efforts that would force the battery's terminals within reach.

"I'll try it on mine," said Sykes. "It may be hot—and you've had your share." He was holding the flat black thing to bring the copper tips against the metal about his wrists. McGuire saw the man's lips go white as a wisp of smoke brought to his nostrils the sickening odor of burned flesh.

The metal glowed, and the man was writhing in silent self-torture when at last he threw his weight upon the strands and fell backward to the floor. He lay for a moment, trembling and quivering—but free. And the knowledge of that freedom and of the greater torture they would both escape, gave him strength to rise and work with crippled hands at his companion's bonds, till McGuire, too, was free—free to forget his own swollen, bleeding wrists in compassionate regard for the other.

Like an injured animal, Professor Sykes had licked with his tongue at his wrists, where hot wire had burned deep and white, and he was trying for forgetfulness an hour later, in examination of the door to their room.

"What is the idea?" McGuire inquired, when he turned from his cease-

less contemplation of the fleet. "Not trying to get out, are you?"

"I am trying to stay in," said Sykes, and looked again at the object that interested him. "These long bolts," he explained; "top and bottom; operated from outside, but exposed in here. They come together when unlocked; five inches apart now. If I had something to hold them apart—

"You haven't a piece of steel about five inches long, have you?—or anything to substitute for it? If you have, I can lock this door so the devils won't come in and surprise us before we can make the jump."

"The battery?" suggested McGuire.

SYKES shook his head. "I tried it. Too long, and besides it would crumble. They operate these with a lever; I saw it outside." He went on silently with his study of the door and the little gap between heavy bolts, which, if closed, would mean security from invasion.

"They're about through," McGuire spoke from his post at the window after some time. "The rush seems to be about over. I imagine they'll pull out in the morning."

He pointed as Sykes stood beside him. "Those big ones over beyond have not been touched all day; only some of the crew, I judge, working around them. And way over you see forty or fifty whaling big ones: they must have been ready before we came. They have finished on these nearer by. It looks like a big day for the brutes.

And Professor Sykes led him on to talk more of the preparations he had seen, and his deductions as to the morrow. It was all too evident what was really on the lieutenant's mind. It was not the thought of their own immediate death, but the terrible dread and horror of Althora's fate, that hammered and hammered in his brain. To speak of anything else meant a moment's relief.

Sykes pointed to a tall mast that was set in the plaza pavement, some hundred feet away. Wires swung from it to several points, one of them ending above their window and entering the building. What is that?" he asked, "—some radio device? That ball of metal on the top might be an aerial." But McGuire had fallen silent again, and stared stonily at the deadly fighting ships he was powerless to combat.

ON the morning that followed, there was no uncertainty. This was the day! And from a balconied window up high in the side of a tall stone building, two men stood wordless and waiting while they watched the preparations below.

The open space was a sea of motion like flowing blood, where thousands of figures in dull red marched in rank after rank to be swallowed in the mammoth ships that McGuire had noted in the distance. Then other colors, and swarms of what they took to be women-folk of this wild race—a medley of color that flowed on and on as if it would never cease, to fill one after another of the great ships.

"Transports, that's what they are," said McGuire. "I can see now why they have no steel beaks like the others. They don't need any rams, nor ports for firing that beastly gas. They are gray, too, while the fighting ships are striped with red, all except the scarlet one of Torg's. Those are colonists we are watching, and soldiers to conquer the Earth where the damned swarm settles."

He stopped to stare at a body of red-clad soldiers, drawn up at attention. They made a lane, and their arms were raised in the salute that seemed only for Torg. They stood rigid and motionless; then, from below the watching men, came one in the full splendor of his scarlet regalia. The air echoed with the din of his shouted name, but the bedlam of noise fell on deaf ears for McGuire. He could hear nothing, and in all the vast kaleidoscope of color he could see only one object—the white face of a girl who was half led

and half carried by a guard of the red ones, where their Emperor led the way.

IT was a strangled cry that was torn from the flyer's throat—the name of this girl who was going to the doom she had failed to avoid. Her life, she had said, was hers to keep only if she willed, but her plans had failed, and she went faltering and stumbling after a scarlet man-beast.

"Althora!" called the flyer, and the figure of the girl was struggling with her guards in a frenzy that tore their hands free. She turned to look toward the sound of the voice, and her face was like that of one dead as her eyes found the man she loved.

"Tommy," she called; "oh, Tommy, my dear! Good-by!" The words were ended by the clutch of the scarlet Emperor who turned to seize her.

A clatter came from the door behind them, but Lieutenant McGuire gave no heed. Only Professor Sykes sprang back from the balcony to seize and struggle with the moving bolts.

The man on the balcony was hardly less than a maniac as he glared wildly about, but he was not too unreasoning to see the folly of a wild leap into the throng below. He could never reach her — never. And then his eyes fell upon the wire that led from above him to the great pole in the open plaza. There was shouting from behind where the executioners were wrestling with the bolts.

"Hold them," the flyer shouted, "just for a minute! For God's sake, Sykes, keep them back! There's a chance!"

He sprang to the balustrade of the balcony, but he saw as he leaped where Professor Sykes had raised his leg to force the thickness of his knee between the bolts whose levers outside were bringing them closer together.

"Go to it," was the answer. "I can hold them"—a stifled groan—" for a—minute!" Professor Sykes had found his substitute for five inches of steel, and the living flesh yielded but slowly to the pressure of the bolts.

MCGUIRE was working frantically at the wire, then held himself in check while he carefully unwound it from its fastening. There was a splice, and he worked with bleeding fingers to unfasten the tight coils. And then the end was free and in his hands. He dropped to the balcony to pull in the slack, and he wrapped the end about beneath his arms and twisted it tight, then leaped out into space. No thought of himself nor of Sykes in this one wild moment, only of Althora in the grip of those beastly hands.

He was struggling to turn himself in air as the colored masses of people seemed sweeping toward him, and he shot as a living pendulum, feet first, into the waiting heads.

He was on his feet in an instant and tearing at the twisted wire that held him. About him was clamor and confusion, but beyond the nearer figures he saw the one who waited, and beside her a thing in scarlet that shrieked orders to his men.

He flung off one who leaped toward him, and ducked another to dash through and reach his man. And he neither saw nor felt the creature's ripping talons as he drove a succession of rights and lefts to the blood-red face.

The scarlet one went backward under the fusillade of blows; he was down, a huddle of color upon the pavement, and a horde of paralyzed soldiers had recovered from their stupefaction and were rushing upon the flyer. He turned to meet them, but their rush ended as quickly as it began; only a step or two they came, then stopped, to add their wild voices to the confusion of ear-splitting shrieks that rose from all sides.

MCGUIRE crouched rigid, tense and waiting, nor did he sense for an instant that the assault was checked and that the faces of all about him were turned to the sky. It was the voice of Althora that aroused him:

"Tommy! Tommy!" she was calling,

and now she was at his side, her arms about him. "What is it, Tommy? Look! Look!" And she too was gazing aloft. And then, above all other sounds McGuire heard the roar—

The clouds were golden above with the brilliance of midday—and against them, hard and sharp of outline, was a shining shape. A cloud of vapor streamed behind it as it shot down from the clouds, and the thunder of its coming was like the roar of many cannon.

A ship of the red ones was in the air—a fighting ship, whose stripes showed red—and it drove at the roaring menace with its steel beak and a swirling cloud of gas. It seemed that they must crash, when to McGuire's eyes came the stabbing flash of heavy guns from the shining shape. A crashing explosion came down to them as the great beak parted and fell, and the body of the red-striped monster opened in bursting smoke and flame, tore slowly into fragments and fell swiftly to the earth.

It struck with a shattering crash some distance away, but one pair of eyes failed to follow it in its fall. For in the clear air above, with the golden light of distant clouds upon it, a roaring monster of silvery sheen had rolled and swept upward to the heights. And it showed, as it turned, a painted emblem on its bow, a design of clear-cut color, unbelievably familiar — a circle of blue, and within it a white star and a bull's eye of red—the mark of the flying service of the United States!

MC GUIRE never knew how he got Althora and himself back to the building whence he had come. Nor did he see the struggling figures on a balcony, or the leap and fall of a maimed body, where Professor Sykes, when the door had yielded, found surcease and oblivion on the pavement below.

He was to learn that later, but now he had eyes only for a sight that could be but a dream, an unreal vision of a disordered brain. He held the slim form of Althora to him in a crushing grip, while he stared, dry-eyed, above, and his own voice seemed to shout from afar off: "They're ours!" that voice was screaming in a frenzy of exultation. "They're our ships! They've come across!"

The fighting fleet of the red man-things of Venus was taking to the air! The ships rose in a swarm of speeding, darting shapes, and the great one of Torg was in the lead, climbing in fury toward the heights.

Far above them the clouds of gold silhouetted a strange sight, and the air was shaking with the thunder from on high, where, straight and true, a line of silver ships in the sharp V of battle formation drove downward in a deadly, swift descent.

And even afar off, the straining eyes of a half-crazed man could see the markings on their bow—a circle and a star—and the colors of his own lost fighters of the air.

CHAPTER XIX

THE Earth-fleet was a slanting line of swiftness that swept downward from the clouds. A swarm of craft was rising from below. The red-striped fighters met the attack first with a cloud of gas.

The scarlet monster—the flagship of Torg, the Emperor — was in the lead, and they shot with terrific speed across the bows of the oncoming fleet to leave a whirlwind of deadly vapor as they passed. McGuire held his breath in an agony of fear as the cloud enveloped the line of ships, but their bow guns roared staccato crashes in the thunder of their exhausts as they entered the cloud. And they were firing from the stern as they emerged, while two falling cylinders of red and white proved the effectiveness of their fire.

The formation held true as it swept upward and back where the swarming enemy was waiting. They were outnumbered three to one, McGuire saw,

and his heart sang within him as he watched the sharp, speeding V that climbed upward to the enemy's level then swung to throw itself like a lance of light at the massed ships that awaited the attack.

Another cloud of gas!—and a shattered ship!—and again the line emerged to correct its broken formation and drive once more toward the circling swarm.

They came to meet them now, the clusters of red-striped fighting ships, and they tore in from all sides upon the American line, their hooked beaks gleaming in the sun.

AND now, at an unseen signal, the formation broke. Each ship fought for its life, and the stabbing flashes of their guns made ceaseless jets of light against the smoke and gas clouds that were darkening the sky.

"A dog-fight!" breathed Lieutenant McGuire; "and what a dog-fight!" His words were lost in the terrific thunder from above; the roar of the ships and the dull thuds of the guns engulfed them in a maelstrom of noise that battered like physical blows on the watchers below. He swore unconsciously and called down curses upon the enemy as he saw two fighters meet while the shining beak of a ship of the reds crashed through the body of an opposing craft.

The red ship dipped at the bow; it backed off with terrific force; and from the curved beak a ship with the insignia of the red, white and blue slid downward in a swift fall to the death that waited.

They had fought themselves clear, and the Americans, by what must have been arrangement or wireless order, went roaring to the heights. There were some who followed, but the guns of the speeding ships drove them off. Red-and-white shapes fell swiftly from the clouds where the fighting had been, and McGuire knew that his fellows had given an account of themselves in the fighting at close range.

Again the thundering line was sharp and true, and another unswerving attack was launching itself from above. And again the deadly formation, with ever-increasing speed, drove into the enemy with flashing guns, then parted to close with the ones that drove crushingly upon them, while the sharper clatter of rapid-firing guns came to shatter the air.

The fighting craft had been rising from their level field in a succession that seemed endless. They were all in the air now, and only the great transports remained on the paved field.

A RED-STRIPED fighter swept downward in retreat, and, from the smoke clouds, a silvery shape followed in pursuit. It reached the red and white one with its shells, and the great mass crashed with terrific impact on the field. Its pursuer must have seen the monsters still on the ground, and it swung to rake them with a shower of small-caliber shells.

There were machine-guns rattling as it passed above the thronged reds—the troops who were huddled in terror in the open court. It tore on past them—past a figure in khaki who raced forward with the golden form of a girl within his arms, then released her to wave frantically as the silver ship shot by.

Unobserved, McGuire and Althora had been, where they stood beside the buildings: the eyes of their enemies, like their own, were on the monstrous battle above. But now they had called themselves to the attention of the reds, and there were some who rushed upon them with faces livid with rage.

McGuire reached for a weapon from a victim of the machine-gun fire and prepared to defend himself, but the weapon was never used. He saw the silvery shape reverse itself in the air; it turned sharply to throw itself back toward the solitary figure in the uniform of their service and the golden-clad girl beside him.

The flyer raised his weapon, but the

jostling swarm that rushed upon him melted: the ripping fire of machine guns was deafening in his ears. Their deadly tattoo continued while the great ship sank slowly to touch and rest its huge bulk upon the pavement. A door in the ship's curved side opened that the blocky figure of a man might leap forth.

He was grimy of face, and his uniform was streaked with the smoke and sweat of battle, but the face beneath the grime, and the hands that reached to embrace and pound the flyer upon the back, could be only those of one he had known as his captain—Captain Blake.

"You son-of-a-gun!" the shouting figure was repeating. "You damned Irish son-of-a-gun! A. W. O. L.—but you can't get away with it! Come on—get in here! I'm needed up above!"

MCGUIRE was struggling to speak from a throat that was suddenly tight and voiceless. Then—

"Althora," he gasped; "take Althora!" and he motioned toward the girl. And then he remembered the companion he had left in the room above. The battle that had flashed so suddenly had blasted from his mind all other thoughts.

"My God!" he said, "—Sykes! I must get Sykes!"

He turned to run back to the building, only to stop in consternation where a huddle of clothing lay beneath the balcony of their prison room.

It was Sykes—Sykes who had sacrificed himself to make possible the escape of his friend—and McGuire dropped to his knees to touch the body that he knew was shattered beyond any hope of life. He raised the limp burden in his arms and staggered back where more khaki-clad figures had gathered. Two came quickly out to meet him, and he let them take the body of his friend.

"*C'est fini!*"—he repeated the words that Sykes had said; "the end of our little journey!" The arms of Althora were about him as Blake hurried them into the waiting ship, and the roar of enormous power marked the rising of this space ship to throw itself again into the fray.

A SMALL room with a dome of shatter-proof glass; a pilot who sat there to look in all directions, a control-board beneath his hands. Beside him on his elevated station was room for Captain Blake, and McGuire and Althora, too. The ship was climbing swiftly. McGuire saw where flashing shapes circled and roared in a swelling cloud of smoke and gas.

Blake spoke sharply to an aide: "General orders! All ships climb to resume formation!"

An enemy ship was before them; it flashed from nowhere to bear down with terrific speed. The floor beneath them shook with the jarring of heavy guns, and McGuire saw the advancing shape bursting with puffs of smoke, while their own ship shot upward with a sickening twist. A silver ship was falling!—and another!

"Two more of ours gone," said Captain Blake through set teeth. "How many of them are there, Mac? Tell me what you know: we've got a hell of a fight on our hands."

"They're all here," McGuire told him, in jerky, breathless speech. "Those are transports on the ground. Their weapons are gas and speed, and the rams on their beaked ships. There are other weapons — deadlier ones! — but they haven't got them: they belong to another race. I'll tell you all that later!

"Keep them at a distance, Blake," he said. "Make them come to you—then nail them as they come."

"Right!" was the answer; "that's good dope. We didn't know what they had; expected some devilish things that could down us before we got within effective range; had to mix it with them to find out what they could do, and get in a few solid cracks before they did it.

"How high are we?" He glanced quickly at an instrument. "Ten thousand. Order all ships to withdraw," he instructed his aide. "Rendezvous at fifty thousand feet for echelon formation."

ANOTHER brush with an enemy craft that slipped quickly to one side—then the smoke clouds were behind them, and a score of silvery shapes were climbing in vertical flight for the level at fifty thousand.

They were fewer now than they had been, and the line that formed behind the flagship of Blake was shorter than the one that had made the V which shot down so bravely to engage with an unknown foe.

The enemy was below; an arrangement of mirrors showed this from the commander's station. They were emerging from the clouds of smoke to swarm in circling flight through the sky. And now the bow of their own craft was depressed at an order from Blake, and the others were behind them as they drove to renew the attack.

"They're ganging up on us again," said Blake. "We'll fool them this time; we'll just kid them a little."

The flagship swerved before reaching the enemy, and the others followed in what looked like frightened retreat. Again they were in the heights, and some few of the enemy were following. Blake led in another descent.

NO waiting swarm to greet them now! Blake gave a quick order. The roaring column shifted position as it fell; the flagship was the apex of a great V whose arms flung out and backward on either side — a V formation that curved and twisted through space and thundered upon the smaller formations that scattered before the blasting guns.

"Our bow guns are the effective weapons," Blake observed: his casual tone was a sedative to McGuire's tense nerves. "We can use a broadside only of lighter weight; the kick of the big 'sights' has to be taken straight back. But we're working back home, on recoil-absorbing guns: we'll make fighting ships of these things yet."

He spoke quietly to the pilot to direct their course toward a group that came sweeping upon them, and the massed fire of the squadron was squarely into the oncoming beaks that fell beneath them where the mirrors showed them crashing to the earth.

They were scattered now; the enemy was in wild disorder; and Blake spoke sharply to his aide.

"Break formation," he ordered; "every ship for itself. Engage the enemy where they find them; shoot down anything they see; prevent the enemy reforming!" He was taking quick advantage of the other's scattered forces, and he scattered his own that he knew could take care of themselves while they engaged the enemy only by ones or twos or threes.

"Clear the air of them!" he ordered. "Not one of them must escape!"

The skies were a maze of darting shapes that crossed and recrossed to make a spider's web of light. Ship drove at ship, to swerve off at the last, while the air quivered and beat upon them with the explosion of shells and guns.

"There's our meat!" Blake directed the pilot, and pointed ahead where a monster in scarlet was swelling into view.

It came swiftly upon them, darting down from above, and McGuire clutched at the arm of the man beside him to shout: "It's the leader; the flagship! It's the Emperor—Torg, himself! Give him hell, Blake, but look out—he's fast!"

THE ship was upon them like a flash of fire; no time for anything but dodging, and the pilot threw his craft wildly aside with a swerve that sent the men sprawling against a stanchion. Then up and back, where the other had turned to come up from below.

"Fast!" McGuire had said, but the word was inadequate to describe the speed of the fiery shape.

Another leap in the air, as their pilot swung his controls, and the red shape brushed past them in a cloud of gas, while the quick-firers ripped futilely into space where the great ship had been.

"Get your bow guns on him!" Blake roared. The ship beneath them strained and shuddered with the incredible thunder of the generator that threw them bodily in the air. The pilot had opened in full force the ports that blasted their bows aside.

No time to gather new speed; they were motionless as the scarlet monster came upon them, but they were in position to receive him. The eight-inch rifles of the forward turret thundered again and again, to be answered by flashes of flame from the scarlet ship.

McGuire crouched over the bent form of the pilot, whose steady fingers held the ship's bow straight upon the flashing death that bore down upon them. Another salvo!—and another!—hits all of them. . . . Smoke bursting from ripping plates, and flaming fire more vivid than the scarlet shape itself!—and the floor beneath McGuire's feet drove crushingly upward as their pilot pulled a lever to the full.

The great beak flashed beneath—and the mirrors, where McGuire's eyes were fastened, showed the terrific drive continue down and down, where a brilliant cylinder that marked the power of Venus tore shriekingly on to carry an Emperor to his crashing death.

THE skies were clear of the red-striped ships; only the survivors of the attacking force showed their silvery shapes as they gathered near their flagship. There were two that pursued a small group of the enemy, but they were being outdistanced in the race.

"We have won," said Blake in a tone of wonder that showed how only now had come a realization of what the victory meant. "We have won, and the earth—is saved!"

And the voice of McGuire echoed his fervent "Thank God!" while he gripped the soft hand that clung tightly to his, as if Althora, this radiant creature of Venus, were timid and abashed among the joyful, shouting men-folk from another world.

"And now what, Captain?" asked McGuire of his command. "Will you land? There is an army of reds down there asking for punishment."

Blake had turned away; his hand made grimy smears across his face where he wiped away the tears that marked a brave man's utter thankfulness. He covered his emotion with an affectation of disapproval as he swung back toward McGuire.

"Captain?" he inquired. "Captain? Where do you get that captain stuff?"

He pointed to an emblem on his uniform, a design that was unfamiliar to the eyes of McGuire.

"You're talking to an admiral now! —the first admiral of the newest branch of your country's fighting service—commanding the first fleet of the Space ships of the United States of America!" He threw one arm about the other's shoulders. "We'll have to get busy, Mac," he added, "and think up a new rank for you.

"And, yes, we are going to land," he continued in his customary tones; "there may be survivors of our own crashes. But we'll have to count on you, Mac, to show us around this little new world of yours."

THERE was an army waiting, as McGuire had warned, but it was waiting to give punishment and not to take it. The vast expanse of the landing field was swarming with them, and the open country beyond showed columns of marching troops.

They had learned, too, to take shelter; barricades had been hastily erected, and the men had shields to protect them from the fire of small arms.

Their bodies were enclosed in their gas-tight uniforms whose ugly head-pieces served only to conceal the greater ugliness beneath. They met the ships as they landed with a showering rain of gas that was fired from huge projectors.

"Not so good!" Blake was speaking in the safety of his ship. "We have masks; but great heavens, Mac!—there must be a million of those brutes. We can spray them with machine-gun fire, but we haven't ammunition enough to make a dent in them. And we've got to get out and get to our crashed ships."

He waited for McGuire's suggestions, but it was Althora who replied.

"Wait!" she said imperatively. She seemed to be listening to some distant word. Then:

"Djorn is coming," she exclaimed, and her eyes were brilliantly alight. "He says to you"—she pointed to McGuire—"that you were right, that we must fight like hell sometimes to deserve our heaven—oh, I told him what you said—and now he is coming with all his men!"

"What the devil?" asked Blake in amazement. "How does she know?"

"Telepathy," McGuire explained; "she is talking with her brother, the leader of the real inhabitants of Venus."

He told the wondering man briefly of his experience and of the people themselves, the real owners of this world.

"But what can they do?" Blake demanded.

And McGuire assured him: "Plenty!"

HE turned to Althora to ask, "How are they coming? How will they get here?"

"They are marching underground; they have been coming for two days. They knew of our being captured, but the people have been slow in deciding to fight. Djorn dared not tell me of their coming; he feared he might be too late.

"They will come out of that building," she said, and indicated the towering structure that had been their prison. "It has the old connection with the underground world."

"Well, they'd better be good!" said Blake incredulously.

He was still less optimistic when the building before them showed the coming of a file of men. They poured forth in orderly fashion and ranged themselves in single file along the walls.

There must be a thousand, McGuire estimated, and he wondered if the women, too, were fighting for their own. Then, remembering Althora's brave insistence, he knew his surmise was correct.

Each one was masked against the gas; their faces were concealed; and each one held before him a tube of shining metal with a larger bulbous end that rested in their hands.

"Electronic projectors," the lieutenant whispered. "Keep your eye on the enemy, Blake; you are going to learn something about war."

The thin line was advancing now, and the gas billowed about them as they came. There were some few who dropped, where masks were defective, but the line came on, and the slim tubes were before them in glittering menace.

AT a distance of a hundred feet from the first of the entrenched enemy there was a movement along the line, as if the holders of the tubes had each set a mechanism in operation. And before the eyes of the Earth-men was a spectacle of horror like nothing in wars they had known.

The barricades were instantly a roaring furnace; the figures that leaped from behind them only added to the flames. From the steady rank of the attackers poured an invisible something before which the hosts of the enemy fell in huddles of flame. Those nearest were blasted from sight in a holocaust of horror, and where they had been was a scattering of embers

that smoked and glowed; even the figures of distant ones stumbled and fell.

The myriad fighters of the army of the red ones, when the attackers shut off their invisible rays, was a screaming mob that raced wildly over the open lands beyond.

Althora's hands were covering her eyes, but McGuire and Blake, and the crowding men about them, stared in awe and utter astonishment at the devastation that was sweeping this world. An army annihilated before their eyes! Scores of thousands, there must be, of the dead!

The voice of Blake was husky with horror. "What a choice little bit out of hell!" he exclaimed. "Mac, did you say they were our friends? God help us if they're not!"

"They are," said McGuire grimly. "Those are Althora's people who had forgotten how to fight; they are recapturing something that they lost some centuries ago. But can they ever destroy the rest of that swarm? I don't think they have the heart to do it."

"They do not need." It was Althora speaking. "My people are sickened with the slaughter. But the red ones will go back into the earth, and we will seal them in!—it is Djorn who tells me — and the world will be ours forevermore."

A MATTER of two short days, crammed to the uttermost with the realization of the astounding turn of events — and McGuire and Althora stood with Blake and Djorn, the ruler, undisputed, of the beautiful world of Venus. A fleet of great ships was roaring high in air. One only, the flagship, was waiting where their little group stood.

The bodies of the fallen had been recovered; they were at rest now in the ships that waited above. McGuire looked about in final wonder at the sparkling city bathed in a flood of gold. A kindly city now — beautiful; the terrors it had held were fading from his mind. He turned to Althora.

"We are going home," he said softly, "you and I."

"Home?" Althora's voice was vibrant with dismay.

"We need you here, friend Mack Guire," the voice of Djorn broke in, in protest. "You have something that we lack—a force and vision—something we have lost."

"We will be back," the flyer assured him. "You befriended me: anything I can do in return—" The grip of his hand completed the sentence.

"But there is a grave to be made on the summit of Mount Lawson," he added quietly. "I think he would have preferred to lie there—at the end of his journey—and I must return to the service where I have not yet been mustered out."

"But you said—you were going home," faltered Althora. "Will that always be home to you, Tommy?"

"Home, my dear," he whispered in words that reached her only, "is just where you are." His arm went about her to draw her toward the waiting ship. "There or here—what matter? We will be content."

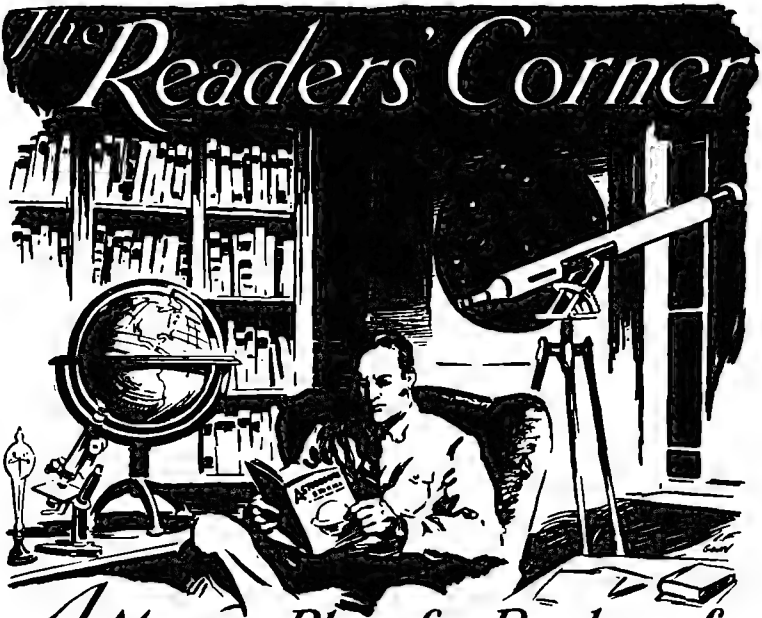
Her eyes were misty as they smiled an answer. Within the ship that was lifting them, they turned to watch a city of opal light grow faintly luminous in the distance . . . an L-shaped continent shrunk to tiny size . . . and the nebulous vapors of the cloudland that enclosed this world folded softly about.

"We will lead," the voice of Blake was saying to an aide; "same formation that we used coming over. Give the necessary orders. But," he added slowly to himself, "the line will be shorter; there are fewer of us now."

An astronomical officer laid a chart before the commander. "We are on the course, sir," he reported.

"Full speed," Blake gave the order, and the thundering generator answered from the stern. The Space Fleet of America was going home.

(The End)



A Meeting Place for Readers of Astounding Stories

"Absurd" to "Superb"

Dear Editor:

Unfortunately, I missed the January number of your very excellent magazine, which I consider superior to any of its type. I brought seven copies—February to August—with me on my vacation, and have so far read the first three from cover to cover.

The February and March numbers were almost above reproach, but the April number contained two stories so surprisingly poor that I can only conjecture the Editor was ill at that time. They were "The Man who was Dead," by Thomas H. Knight and "Monsters of Moyen," by Arthur J. Burks. For Mr. Knight there is no hope. To him I can only say, "Stop trying to write and get a job." I am a rapid and omnivorous reader, but never have I read a story as utterly bad as his. He gets the booby prize.

Arthur J. Burks, although a master artist in comparison to Knight, is pretty poor—terrible, in fact. His style is dull, repetitious, and stilted. His melodrama is exaggerated to the point of nauseating absurdity. His characters are lifeless and unnatural puppets. So much for the faults.

Among the best Science Fiction stories I have read is "The Planet of Dread," by R. F. Starzl, in the August number. I also very much enjoyed the "Dr. Bird" stories by Capt. Meek, and indeed all the others, barring the two I criticized in such a helpful, friendly spirit. Leinster and Cummings are old favorites of mine.

I prefer your present cover, but disagree with your attitude towards reprinting the older works of such authors as George Allan England, Serviss and Cummings, which are now unobtainable and would, I believe, be received with pleasure and applause.

Congratulations.—Joseph S. Stull, 291 Barrington St., Rochester, N. Y.

P. S. Since I wrote I have read the May and June numbers—both perfect. C. D. Willard is a superb storyteller.

Wrong Numbers Still!

Dear Editor:

I agree with the rest of your readers in the good things they say about your magazine in "The Readers' Corner." There is one story, however, "The Planet of Dread," in your August issue, that gives me a rather sickening feeling of disgust. The trouble was in the climax. After the hero has wandered over quite a portion of the planet Inra, he arrives at some mountains where, lo and behold! an unexpected space ship drops from the clouds to an unfrequented ledge of rock

and makes a rescue. After this sensational climax comes an equally thrilling anti-climax —the hero is offered three years' salary for his story. To accuse the future world of doing such a thing is an open insult to our posterity. Ten per cent of my high school freshman tack just such an ending to their first themes.

As that story took up about one-seventh of your space and your magazine cost twenty cents, I figure you owe your readers three cents on that issue. But, due to the fineness of the rest of your stories, I am willing to forget your debt as far as I am concerned.

I am happy to see that you are beginning to print articles. I read with interest the one about Mechanical Voices for Telephone Numbers in your September issue. But can't something be done about wrong numbers? The article states that a person dialed the number 8561T. Two seconds later the loudspeaker spoke up, clearly, in an almost human voice, 8651T. Wrong number! Must this evil be with us always!

I am NOT in favor of reprints. You are printing stories every month just as good as any of those suggested to you. I have read most of those classic scientific stories referred to. The best stories along this line have not been written yet. Keep your space clear for them. Let us have young blood with new ideas. Let our authors eat. Good stories were never written on an empty stomach.

I believe yours is the highest type of the few magazines that lay a greater stress on the brains of the hero than on his good looks. But, for the sake of one of your ardent readers, let that hero use his brains to get himself out of whatever he has gotten into. Don't let a space ship swoop down from above to rescue him. That type of story reminds me a lot of the one where Jonah was rescued from the deep by the timely arrival of the friendly whale. By the way, there's a suggestion for a reprint. I will admit that it would be just about as new to me as some of the others that have been suggested in this "Corner."—Richard Lewis, 449 Marion St., Knoxville, Iowa.

Not So "Green" in Ireland

Dear Editor:

I suppose it's not often you get a letter from an Irish "Paddy," but here's one now. Here in Cork we don't get magazines like Astounding Stories regularly, but I got the May issue to-day and could not stop until I had devoured it from cover to cover. "The Atom Smasher" is a story which I have been hunting for for years. When I had finished it, I had to sit back and leave out all the breath which I was holding in in a prolonged "whew!" If ever I get the luck to find another Astounding Stories I'll burn up the pages looking for the name Victor Rousseau. Next in order I liked "Brigands of the Moon" and "The Jovian Jest." Thought the story "Into the Ocean's Depths" an awful fairy tale, but otherwise good reading. The painter of the cover design is a real artist and I wish to express my appreciation of his wonderful rendering of a difficult subject.—Fitz-Gerald Grattan, 11 Frankfield Terrace, Summerhill South, Cork, Irish Free State.

Worthy His Evening and Pipe

Dear Editor:

I have read my first copy of Astounding Stories, the September.

The first paragraph in the first part of "A Problem in Communication" assured me that I had found a book worthy of my evening and pipe.

Read that paragraph and you will find Dr. Miles Breuer is most brilliant in his philosophy and clever in the application of that philosophy in his masterpiece of the science of communication.—Don L. Schweitzer, 1402 Bancroft St., Omaha, Nebr.

"Taking a Claw Hold"

Dear Editor:

Was just reading the September issue of A. S. and find it ranging first among the Science Fiction magazines now printed. I'm certain your "Jetta of the Lowlands" is going to be a masterpiece of Ray Cummings'. He is my favorite writer.

I did not like "Earth, the Marauder." It was too much drawn out and very dry. "Brigands of the Moon" was excellent.

I wish you would print my letter, as I'd like any one, male or female, interested in science to write to me. Would you kindly oblige me?

I'm glad to see girls taking interest in your magazine, as it shows science is taking a claw hold on everyone.—Harold BegGell, 29 Stewart St., Washington, N. J.

This and That

Dear Editor:

In the October issue of Astounding Stories, Mr. Woodrow Gelman casts vote No. 1 for reprints. Well, here is vote No. 2. I intended to reply to all your arguments against reprints, but Mr. Gelman has done this very satisfactorily, indeed. I only wish to make a few additional comments.

You say that only one out of a hundred haven't read reprints [?]. Fifty out of a hundred would be more correct. Five years ago there wasn't a single magazine devoted exclusively to Science Fiction. Now there are six of them, more or less. These magazines have converted thousands of readers into Science Fiction fans. These readers ought to be given a chance to read the old masterpieces. Even those who have read them would be glad to reread them.

With the exception of reprints you have pretty near carried out all the readers' wishes. You have put in a readers' department, increased Wesso's illustrations, given us many interplanetary stories, and given us the stories of the leading authors of the day. Surely you can give us reprints when the demand for them is so universal. The ones I want are those written by Cummings, Merritt, Rousseau and Serviss, and I am sure that the rest of the readers want them too. If you are still doubtful, the fairest thing to do is

to conduct a vote among the readers. I hope that you will pardon me for being so persistent, but I am sure that you are working in the best interests of the readers and that you will accede to a great and growing popular demand.

Now about the latest issue of Astounding Stories. "The Invisible Death" is the best novelette you have printed up to now. With the exception of Ray Cummings, the best author you have is Victor Rousseau. I am glad to see that there is another story by Rousseau scheduled for next month. Murray Leinster is a close third, and I hope to see more of his stories soon. The second part of "Jetta of the Lowlands" was better than the first. "Stolen Brains" was also excellent. Keep on printing the Dr. Bird stories. I like them very much.

Although the stories were splendid, the cover illustration was poor. I believe that this is the worst cover that Wesso has ever drawn. The main fault with it is that there is no science in it. It would be more appropriate for one of those detective magazines. "The Invisible Death" has many other interesting scenes from which Wesso could have chosen a more fitting subject. However, Wesso is your best artist and you ought to keep him.—Michael Fogaris, 157 Fourth St., Passaic, N. J.

"Not Spoiled by Editor"

Dear Editor:

There is one advantage that Astounding Stories has over all of the other Science Fiction magazines. It does not overburden one with an exposition of scientific facts. Too often a story is ruined by a lot of dry textbook stuff that turns an exciting story into a lecture.

In Astounding Stories we can soar away on the wings of imagination, escaping the humdrum everyday world to new and amazing adventures. The hours fly away like the speed of light, and upon finishing the book our only regret is that we have to wait a whole month before another issue takes us aloft again.

Having unburdened myself thus far, I think it is most fitting to comment upon your latest (October) issue. To my mind, the stories in order of merit are: "The Invisible Death," "Stolen Brains," "Jetta of the Lowlands," "Prisoners on the Electron," and "An Extra Man."

I certainly am glad to see Ray Cummings writing for your most excellent magazine. He is an A-1 author.

It does not make a particle of difference to me about the size of the magazine, but I wish you would have smooth edges like those of your Five-Novels Monthly.

Am glad to see that "The Readers' Corner" is enlarged. I always turn to this first, even before reading the stories. This is a most entertaining department, and I'm glad it is not spoiled by any perfunctory remarks from the editor.

How about publishing Astounding Stories twice a month?—E. Anderson, 1765 Southern Blvd., New York City, New York.

Roses, Daisies and Violets

Dear Editor:

In appreciation of an enjoyable evening of reading—which extended, by the way, into the wee, sma' hours of early morning—I thought to drop you a few lines, speaking of the high regard your magazine, Astounding Stories, has won from me through merit alone. Your October number particularly fitted into my reading mood last night.

After the daily grind of newspaper work, it might seem odd that relaxation is sought in "more reading"—but it has been my experience, and that of many of my co-workers, I find, that the relief from the high tension of our trade comes from the change in the character of what we read, rather than in "something else," such as physical recreation. Fiction relaxes where "news" has keyed up.

And in the Science Fiction of your magazine's stories of super-science, I find the keenest periods of mental enjoyment through the admirable selection of Astounding Stories' mixed adventure, unique travel and prophetic science. In this I am not alone—a number of my acquaintances have reveled likewise in your magazine at my suggestion.

I have not quite settled in my mind as to whether you have trained your writers to exploit this special field of magazine fiction, which you occupy so successfully, or, in your editorial capacity, have so well selected the stories that bear the hallmarks of this peculiar interest that appeals so strongly to my leisure hours.

By whichever road your success has been reached is immaterial—Astounding Stories has registered with me in a degree which should be flattering to your editorial supervision, if I represent, as I think I do, that large class of magazine readers who prefer and seek a science-coated outlet from the humdrum of every day living in mental adventure and travel-thrill reading.

Have I presented clearly why and how much I like your magazine of Astounding Stories!—E. P. Neill, 910 East Ave., Red Wing, Minn.

"Much Easier to Turn"

Dear Editor:

Once more I am impelled to give a roar. The last few issues have been filled with letters from readers who are evidently not satisfied with a "different" magazine. If they do not like to read "our" magazine then let them quit, but don't let a heckling minority spoil a real treat. My particular growl this time is directed towards Robert Baldwin and others of his ilk, who squawk about the size (i. e. length and width) of the mag, and the uneven pages. The size is perfect (and just because the craze for standardization has hit some of the other Science Fiction mags and they have gone ga-ga over being an awkward shape, that is no reason for your going ahead and spoiling this one) and the uneven pages are a relief when reading because it is much easier to turn over a leaf when they are of a slightly different width.

However, to take some of the sting off, I

must say some of the ideas of said Mr. Baldwin are O. K. Enlarge the mag—of course you will, as readers increase and sales go up. Larger, as he says, "It will be worth the other jitney." Put ads in the rear. Have full page illustrations when possible. But another thing he is absolutely wrong on. Please do not adopt that antique method of continuing a story on page umptyump.

Some of the readers are still yowling for reprints. Well, it is true that some reprints would be very acceptable. However, as most of the really good old-time tales of Science Fiction can be procured in any good sized library, why bother to print them and thus decrease the space allotted to our new authors, some of whom are even better than Wells, Verne, etc., much as I like the old masters.

By the way, my "enlarge" in the second paragraph means in thickness (amount of reading matter), not shape.

Wesso has always been good, and he seems to be improving, though he and others might be still better if they would carefully read the descriptions of persons and animals of other planets before picturing them. I don't wish to make this blurb too long, so will not be specific, but you and others probably have seen the same as I, where the illustration has not been true to the description.

It might interest you to know that I have been instrumental in getting several new readers for Astounding Stories. Long live "our" new mag.—Robert J. Hyatt, 1358 Kenyon St., N. W., Washington, D. C.

Ow! Ow! Ow!

Dear Editor:

I have just looked at "The Readers' Corner" in the October issue of Astounding Stories. It disgusted me. What do you print there—only letters praising your magazine to the skies?—or do you occasionally print a brickbat?

I've bought your magazine each time since it was first printed. And many times I've felt like quitting. Why? There are a number of reasons.

First, you print stories that have nothing to do with science, such as "The Soul Master." Second, your illustrations are poor. They would look better if they were full-page ones. Wesso is the best artist you have. Gould and Sabo are just plain cartoonists, and mighty poor ones at that. Third, you print stories that give a weak and implausible scientific basis. Diffin, Gee, Leinster and several others err in this respect. Fourth, rotten paper—it goes to pieces after being handled. Fifth, no editorial or science questionnaire.

Your authors will not starve if you print reprints. Rousseau and a lot of others write for other magazines. And reprints would occupy such a measly space that they could hardly be called down for being printed.

Your magazine has some good features: a good cover; good authors like Breuer, Vincent, Meek, Ernst and Starzl; clear type; and handy size.

If anyone thinks that I'm wrong—well, my address is given. This challenge includes the editor. I sincerely hope you will improve your magazine.—Edwin C. Magnuson, 1206 E. Ninth St., Duluth, Minn.

Suggestions

Dear Editor:

I have read your excellent magazine ever since it came out, and though it needs a few corrections like the others, A. S. is nearly perfect. Why not have your pages evened up, and add a department of science on subjects such as Rocket Propulsion, etc., so the readers could become familiar with the mystifying problems stated in the stories? Have the advertisements in the back, and don't change your artists as their work is satisfactory.

Robert Baldwin of Illinois has an excellent list of suggestions. Why not have a page devoted to the pictures and biographies of your writers, and full page illustrations? Why not have a space for good reprints and charge a nickel more? I am sure it will be appreciated by readers. Why don't you put out a Quarterly, twice as thick or containing twice as many stories, for fifty cents? —A satisfied reader.—Hume V. Stephani, 37½ Wood St., Auburn, New York.

"The Readers' Corner"

All readers are extended a sincere and cordial invitation to "come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and join in our monthly discussion of stories, authors, scientific principles and possibilities—everything that's of common interest in connection with our Astounding Stories.

Although from time to time the Editor may make a comment or so, this is a department primarily for *Readers*, and we want you to make full use of it. Likes, dislikes, criticisms, explanations, roses, brickbats, suggestions—everything's welcome here; so "come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and discuss it with all of us!

—*The Editor.*

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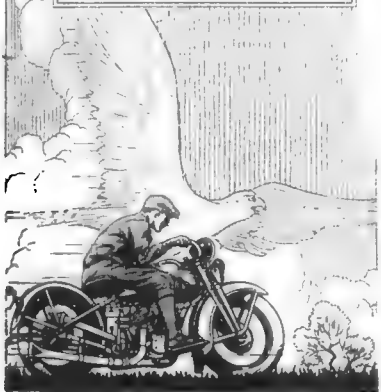

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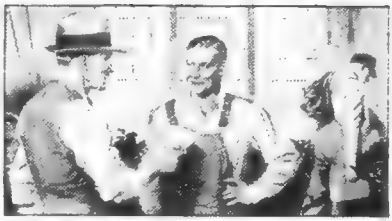

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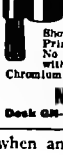

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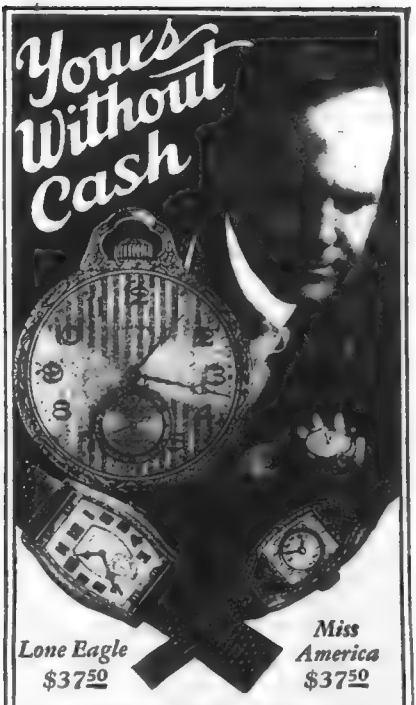

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Stop craving tobacco in any form. Tobacco Redeemer in most cases relieves all craving for it in a few days' time. Don't try to quit the tobacco habit unaided. It's often a losing fight against heavy odds, and may mean a distressing shock to the nervous system. Let Tobacco Redeemer help the habit to quit you. It is pleasant to use, acts quickly, and is thoroughly reliable.

Not a Substitute

Tobacco Redeemer contains no habit-forming drugs of any kind. It is in no sense a substitute for tobacco. After finishing the treatment, there should be no desire to use tobacco again or to continue the use of the remedy. In case the treatment is not perfectly satisfactory, we will gladly refund any money paid. It makes not a particle of difference how long tobacco has been used, how much it is used, or in what form—whether it is cigars, cigarettes, pipe, plug, fine cut or snuff. In most cases, Tobacco Redeemer removes all craving for tobacco in any form in a very few days. And remember, it is offered with a positive money-back guarantee. Write today for our free booklet showing the injurious effect of tobacco upon the human system and convincing evidence that Tobacco Redeemer has relieved the craving for tobacco in thousands of cases.

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$15 a Day Besides!

Yes, right now, I'll give you groceries at rock-bottom, wholesale prices and a wonderful chance to pocket $10 to $15 cash profits in a day. If you want proof of this, I'll tell you about Van Allen, of Illinois, who reports profits as high as $125 in a week. Gustav Karnath, a farm laborer in Minnesota, writes: "Made $20 the first 5 hours." Mrs. B. L. Hodges, of New York, says she never fails to make $18 to $20 a day. Of course some make more than others. But these big earnings of a few of my Representatives show you the wonderful opportunities. And today I offer you an *even greater* proposition than I gave these people. Give me a chance to prove it!

Big Profits for Pleasant Work

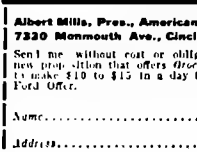
I am President of an old-established, million-dollar manufacturing company. We distribute high-quality Groceries and other Household Necessities direct from factory to user through Authorized Local Representatives. We have thousands of customers in every state. Last year our Representatives made nearly *two million dollars!* Now I invite you to share in these big profits. And I will give you Groceries and other Household Supplies *at savings of nearly one half!* Thus you have a wonderful chance to *make* and *save* big money.

No Capital or Experience Needed

You positively don't need any capital or experience. No course of training is required. All you do is call on your friends and my established customers in your territory and take care of their orders. I never sell through stores. *You alone get the profit on all orders from these customers.* If you wish, you may keep your present job and start with me in spare time. Oscar Stuart, of West Virginia, reports $18 profit in 2½ hours' spare time. Mrs. K. H. Roof, of South Carolina, made over $50 the first week in spare time. This shows the tremendous possibilities.

FREE! New Ford Tudor Sedan

Not a contest. I offer a brand new car free to producers as an extra reward or bonus—*in addition* to their large cash profits. Mail coupon for particulars.



Send No Money

If you want to get groceries at our rock-bottom, wholesale prices—and a chance to make $10 to $15 in a day besides—send me your name and address at once. Don't miss this wonderful opportunity. Let me give you full details of my amazing new plan without cost or obligation. I'll give you the big opportunity you've long been waiting for. So don't lose a moment. Mail the coupon *today sure!*

MAIL THIS NOW

Albert Mills, Pres., American Products Co., 7320 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

Send me without cost or obligation, all the facts about your new proposition that offers *Groceries at Wholesale* and a chance to make $10 to $15 in a day besides. Also explain your FREE Ford Offer.

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Complete line of gorgeous sample fabrics given free. De luxe presentation that hands you cash with every showing. Act at Once—Capitalize this amazing free offer plan.

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32x3½	2.25	1.00	29x4.50	3.40	1.15
31x4	2.95	1.15	30x4.50	3.45	1.20
32x4	2.95	1.15	30x4.50	3.45	1.20
33x4	2.95	1.15	29x5.25	3.95	1.25
34x4	3.50	1.15	30x5.25	4.00	1.25
32x4½	3.20	1.45	31x5.25	4.10	1.25
33x4½	3.20	1.45	30x5.77	3.29	1.40
34x4½	3.45	1.45	32x6.00	3.29	1.40
35x5	3.60	1.75	33x6.00	3.29	1.40
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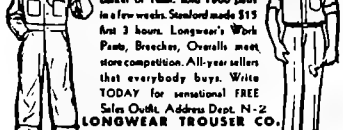

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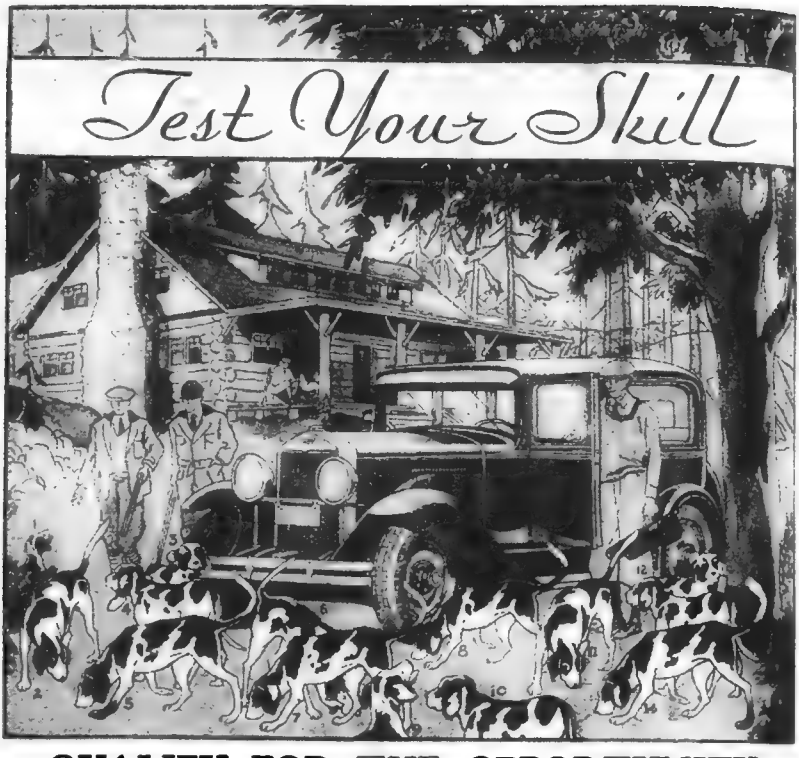

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GARGLE EVERY 2 HOURS

when you have a cold or inflamed throat

You can often relieve sore throat and check a cold before it becomes serious, by gargling with undiluted Listerine every two hours.

Listerine used thus repeatedly seems to give nature an extra attacking force she needs to overcome disease germs multiplying in the nose and throat.

This safe, healing antiseptic kills germs in 15 seconds (fastest killing time accurately recorded by science). Even Staphylococcus Aureus and Bacillus Typhosus in counts ranging to 200,000,000 are killed by it in that time.

Used in the mouth it first kills and then removes such dangerous organisms as the Streptococcus Hemolyticus, M. Catarrhalis, and B. Influenzae, the germs usually associated with colds and sore throat.

When Listerine is used as a mouth wash and gargle, it reduces the number of germs in the mouth 98%, as shown by repeated tests employing the method used at the great Universities. Moreover, it soothes inflamed tissues and sweetens the breath.

Make a habit of gargling morning and night with Listerine, as a precaution against having colds and sore throat. Once these troubles have developed, however, consult your physician and increase the frequency of the gargle. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo.

KILLS 200,000,000 GERMS IN 15 SECONDS

LISTERINE ***reduces mouth bacteria 98%***

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The mildness of Camel is a natural mildness, from the blending of choicest sun-ripened tobaccos—never over-treated, never flat or insipid.

CAMELS

MILD—Not flat

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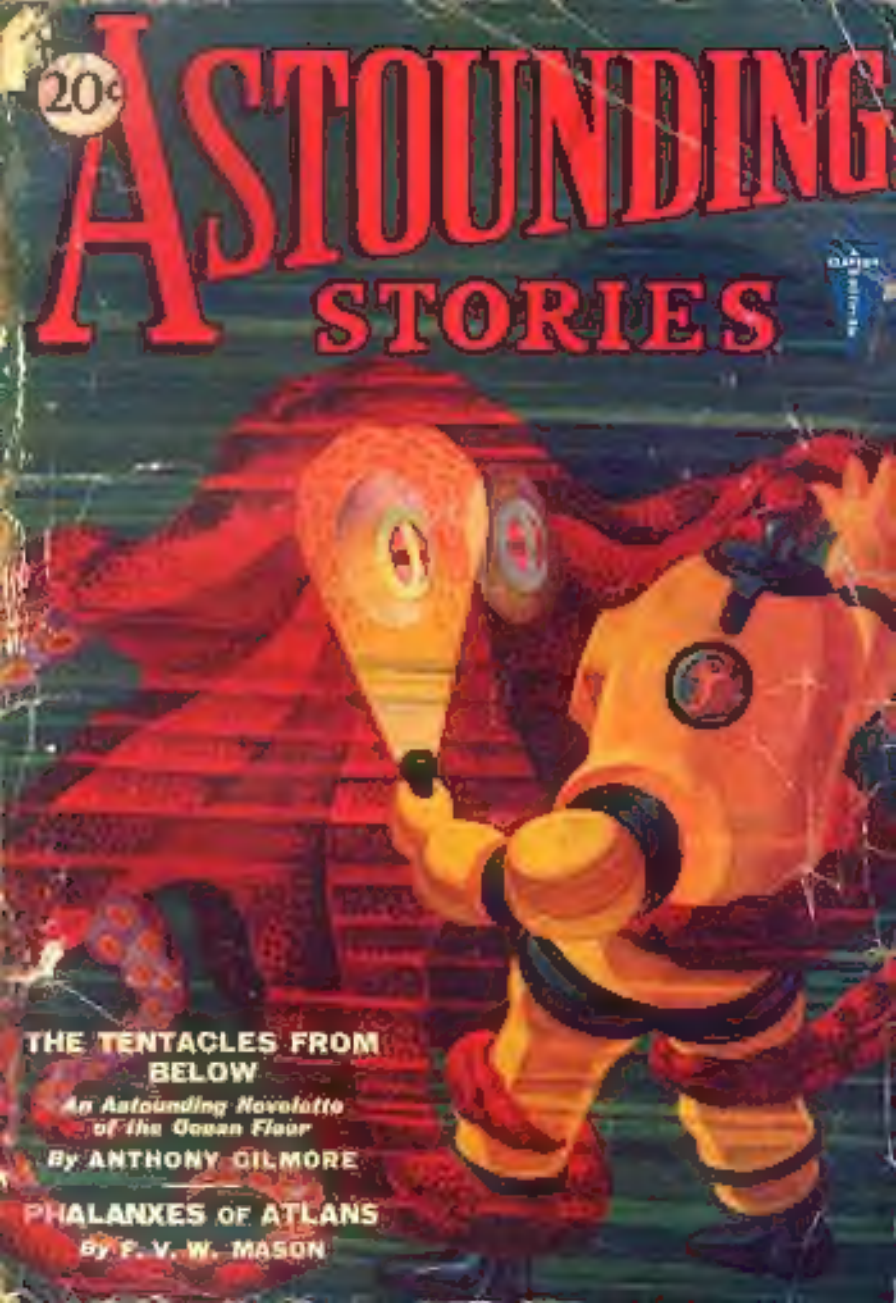

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